

12-15-2023

The Perfect Storm: Social media addiction, mental health, and post-pandemic college life

Kira Donegan
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thecrown>

Recommended Citation

Donegan, Kira (2023) "The Perfect Storm: Social media addiction, mental health, and post-pandemic college life," *The Crown: Syracuse Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 20.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/thecrown/vol1/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Crown: Syracuse Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

The Perfect Storm

Social media addiction, mental health and post-pandemic college life

Kira Donegan
magazine, news, and digital journalism, 2026

Abstract

Social media has long been a topic of debate, especially regarding its impact on the mental health of younger users. Coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic the issue has become a critical research point. With research already showing the negative impacts of both COVID-19 and social media on young adults, an in-depth analysis of the combination of these components can provide critical information about the ramifications on college students. The guiding question for my analysis is: How has the increase in social media use and decline in mental health during COVID-19 impacted college students?

The post-pandemic period is marked by a crisis of mental health, especially among college-aged students. Mental health is the psychological well-being of an individual, and researchers have determined that college is “a period of increased vulnerability for a wide range of mental health (MH) challenges” (Liu, et al.). Multiple studies in Malaysia, the U.S and China have demonstrated that there has been an increase in rates of depression and anxiety among college-aged respondents (Haikal, Michelle et al); (Lim, Leonard Thomas S., et al). This is supported by reports of suicidal ideation and calls for accessible health resources by researchers (Liu, Cindy H, et al.). Further, from February-March of 2020 to July of the same year, there was a 60.5% and 120.3% increase in anxiety and depression respectively in juniors at a mid-sized, private northeastern college (Haikal, Michelle, et al.). In addition, studies show loneliness and anxiety related to school have increased significantly, due to the sudden lack of socialization and complete disruption of academia. Overall, the already substantially poor mental health of college students has plummeted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Haikal, Michelle, et al.).

Mental health is not the only crisis future generations face, as social media has now become addictive to college students. Social media is any website or application whose primary purpose is communication, content-sharing or socialization (Lutkevich, Ben, and Ivy Wigmore). One study

done on two American universities reported that the average number of minutes spent on social media by students was 115.83 per day (Tuck, Alison B., and Renee J. Thompson). This is furthered by the documented increase in daily time spent on social networking sites and habitual use due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One such study has illustrated that there was a 46.62% increase in the number of Bangladeshi university students spending four hours or more on social media during lockdown (Gupta, Ankit, et al.). Additionally, this time went from concentrated periods at night or late in the afternoon to throughout the entire day (Gupta, Ankit, et al.). Countless studies on United States college students produce the same results of drastic increase in usage and frequency of usage, with the original 115.83 minutes mentioned rising to 196.38 minutes during the pandemic (Tuck, Alison B, and Renee J Thompson). The constant use of the word addiction in many of these studies demonstrates how problematic the situation has become, notably with Facebook usage by students in Bangladesh (Ripon, Rezaul Karim, et al.) As such, multiple studies call attention to the problematic relationship and urge for further examination on addiction (Tuck, Alison B, and Renee J Thompson).

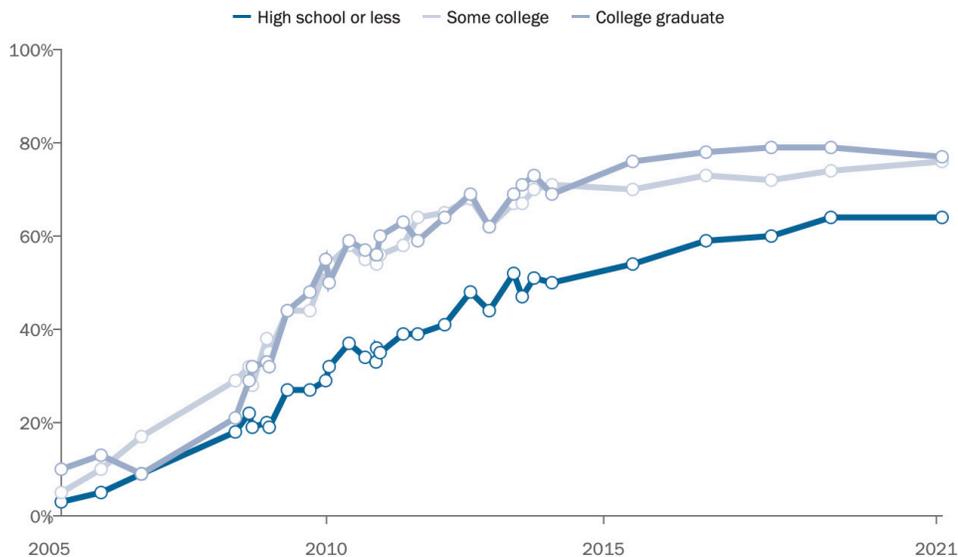
The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the declining trend of mental health, most notably regarding the levels of stress, depression and addiction college students felt. The levels of negative mental health symptoms reported link social media use to secondary trauma and depression during the pandemic (Haddad, J.M., et al.). The frequency of trauma is especially telling of social media's impact, and is even more apparent with statistics relaying that almost half the first year medical students from a study in India reported having mood fluctuations at the same time their usage of social media went up. The researchers concluded that the increase in social media usage had a significant relationship with the students' mood fluctuations, and that both of these components were brought on by the pandemic (Gupta, Ankit, et al). Another study, conducted in the U.S., found that students became reliant on social media as a coping mechanism, and those that used it as a form of escapism suffered greatly (Eden, Allison L, et al). Conclusively, the prevalence of a huge mental health decline and social media upsurge among multiple countries undoubtedly displays the need for studies on the post-pandemic conditions of college students.

Appendix

Figure I

Social media use by education

% of U.S. adults who say they use at least one social media site, by education level



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. 'High school or less' includes both 'Less than high school graduate' and 'High school graduate'. The 2021 sample is too small to separate these two categories.
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2005-2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Bibliography

- Auerbach, R P et al. "Mental disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys." *Psychological medicine* vol. 46,14 (2016): 2955-2970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291716001665>.
- Braun, Johanna. "Introduction." Leuven University Press, 2020, pp. 11–26. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18dvt2d.4>. Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.
- "Covid-19: Student Survey." *Active Minds*, 2 Aug. 2021, <https://www.activeminds.org/studentsurvey/>.
- Eden, Allison L et al. "Media for Coping During COVID-19 Social Distancing: Stress, Anxiety, and Psychological Well-Being." *Frontiers in psychology* vol. 11 577639. 18 Dec. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577639>.
- Fleurimond, Betty, et al. "College Students' Mental Health and Well-Being." *Deloitte Insights*, Deloitte, 6 Aug. 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/college-students-mental-health-covid-19.html>.
- Groth, Gabrielle G et al. "Social media and college student risk behaviors: A mini-review." *Addictive behaviors* vol. 65 (2017): 87-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.10.003>.
- Gupta, Ankit et al. "Social media effects among freshman medical students during COVID-19 lock-down: An online mixed research." *Journal of education and health promotion* vol. 10 55. 27 Feb. 2021, https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp_749_20.

- Haddad, J.M., Macenski, C., Mosier-Mills, A. et al. The Impact of Social Media on College Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Multinational Review of the Existing Literature. *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 23, 70 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-021-01288-y>.
- Haikalis, Michelle et al. “Changes in College Student Anxiety and Depression From Pre- to During-COVID-19: Perceived Stress, Academic Challenges, Loneliness, and Positive Perceptions.” *Emerging adulthood (Print)* vol. 10,2 (2022): 534-545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968211058516>.
- Hong, Wei et al. “Social Media Exposure and College Students’ Mental Health During the Outbreak of COVID-19: The Mediating Role of Rumination and the Moderating Role of Mindfulness.” *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking* vol. 24,4 (2021): 282-287. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0387>.
- Hu, Shengyao. “Mental Health Assessment of Post-00s College Students Based on Knowledge Network.” *Wireless Communications & Mobile Computing*, Aug. 2022, pp. 1–7. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/1966057>.
- Islam, Md Saiful et al. “Problematic Smartphone and Social Media Use Among Bangladeshi College and University Students Amid COVID-19: The Role of Psychological Well-Being and Pandemic Related Factors.” *Frontiers in psychiatry* vol. 12 647386. 16 Apr. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.647386>.
- Kelly, Andrew P., and Rooney Columbus. *College in the Time of Coronavirus: CHALLENGES FACING AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION*. American Enterprise Institute, 2020. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25358>.
- Khan, Amjid, et al. “The Impact of Social Media Usage on Students’ Fear during COVID-19: A Study of Postgraduate Students in Pakistan.” *Journal of Hospital Librarianship*, vol. 22, no. 2, Apr. 2022, pp. 140–53. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15323269.2022.2055357>.
- Lim, Leonard Thomas S., et al. “Assessing the Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Shift to Online Learning, and Social Media Use on the Mental Health of College Students in the Philippines: A Mixed-Method Study Protocol.” *PLoS ONE*, vol. 17, no. 5, May 2022, pp. 1–13. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0267555>.
- Liu, Cindy H et al. “The prevalence and predictors of mental health diagnoses and suicide among U.S. college students: Implications for addressing disparities in service use.” *Depression and anxiety* vol. 36,1 (2019): 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22830>.
- Lutkevich, Ben, and Ivy Wigmore. “What Is Social Media?” *WhatIs.com*, TechTarget, 3 Sept. 2021, <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/social-media>.
- Ripon, Rezaul Karim, et al. “Factors Associated with Facebook Addiction among University Students amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from an Online Cross-Sectional Survey.” *PLoS ONE*, vol. 17, no. 8, Aug. 2022, pp. 1–12. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272905>.
- Showalter, Elaine, and Johanna Braun. “Hysterical Epidemics and Social Media.” Leuven University Press, 2020, pp. 27–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18dvt2d.5>.
- “Social Media Fact Sheet.” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech*, Pew Research Center, 16 Nov. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.
- Tuck, Alison B, and Renee J Thompson. “Social Networking Site Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Associations With Social and Emotional Well-being in College Students: Survey Study.” *JMIR formative research* vol. 5,9 e26513. 7 Sep. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2196/26513>.
- Zhao, Nan, and Guangyu Zhou. “Social Media Use and Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moderator Role of Disaster Stressor and Mediator Role of Negative Affect.” *Applied psychology. Health and well-being* vol. 12, 4 (2020): 1019-1038. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12226>.

