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Social Media Use and Patterns of Emotional Experience

A Consideration of Anxiety, Depression, and Hope

Robin L. Nabi, Lara Wolfers, and Jesse King

Social media use has exploded since the early 2000s with over 4 billion users daily worldwide in 2021 (Statista, 2022). It is only natural, then, that scholars, parents, physicians, psychologists, and other vested parties would be concerned over the effects such use might have on the user, especially in terms of mental health (e.g., Haidt, 2021). Existing reviews of the literature have addressed the link between social media use and well-being (Orben, 2020; Valkenburg, 2022). Our goal with this chapter is to focus more specifically on the relationships between social media use and emotion-based experiences, which in turn relate to mental wellness. As such, we first define social media. We then briefly review two theoretical perspectives on why people respond emotionally to social media content as they do before reviewing the extant literature on the ways in which repeated use of social media may contribute to negative emotional experiences, anxiety and depression in particular, as well as positive experiences, most notably hope and inspiration.

Defining Social Media

Despite the prevalent use of the term, there is no clear consensus on the definition of *social media*. Carr and Hayes (2015) define it as “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others” (p. 50). This definition highlights the interaction among different audiences as well as content consumed, both of which have potentially significant impact on users’ emotional experiences. Although this

definition overlaps heavily with that of social networking sites (SNSs), the term *social media* focuses on the social, interactive nature of networked systems, whereas the definition of SNS focuses more on the structure and use of these platforms (boyd & Ellison, 2007). For the purposes of this chapter, we consider any distinction between the two ancillary to our goal of understanding how the use of such platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit) influences the emotional state of users.

Key Theoretical Perspectives on Emotional Arousal in Response to Social Media

There are a host of theoretical perspectives that can explain why users have emotional responses to the content they consume and the interactions they have on social media. Space restrictions preclude a comprehensive review. However, two theoretical paradigms are worth particular attention: cognitive appraisal theories of emotion and social comparison theory.

Cognitive appraisal theories emphasize the critical role of people's thoughts about their environment (often subconscious) as precursors to discrete emotional experiences. Although there are multiple instantiations of such theories, Lazarus' (1991) cognitive–motivational–relational theory serves as a popular example of one, asserting that each emotion arises from a specific pattern of thoughts evaluating environmental concerns relative to one's goals (see Chapter 1, this volume). Further, each discrete emotion is associated with unique subjective experiences and specific action tendencies (e.g., fear is associated with desire for protection, anger is associated with desire for retribution). Generally speaking, appraisal theories help to explain emotional arousal across a wide range of human experiences, both real and mediated. As such, this perspective can help us understand not only why people experience the momentary emotions they do when using social media (e.g., sadness or envy) but also why repeated use may culminate in more generalized patterns of emotional experience. That is, repeated exposure to content that triggers specific patterns of appraisal not only increases the frequency of feeling particular emotions, like anxiety or sadness, but also increases the likelihood that future content will be perceived through those emotional lenses, which combined can generate more trait-like emotional experiences.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is a second theoretical paradigm that is particularly relevant to understanding emotional responses to social media content. *Social comparison theory* explains how, in the absence of objective information about performance, people compare themselves to

somewhat similar others in order to assess their relative standing in a domain relevant to their personal identity. We might compare ourselves to those we see as better than ourselves in certain areas (upward comparisons) or to those we perceive as worse off (downward comparisons), primarily to achieve accurate self-assessment, though additional motives for social comparison exist, including the need for self-enhancement and self-improvement (Taylor et al., 1995).

Most germane to this context, depending on one's cognitive appraisals, both upward and downward comparisons can elicit either positive or negative emotional experiences (Buunk et al., 1990). In general, negative feelings, like unhappiness (Tesser & Collins, 1988), are likely to emerge during upward comparisons when the observed quality or skill is seen as unattainable and the individual's relatively worse position as unlikely to change (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 2000). Conversely, upward comparisons can result in positive emotions, such as hope, by showing that success is possible (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 2000). Envy is arguably an anomaly as it emerges when the current situation is unfavorable but future success seems obtainable (Lazarus, 1991).

Downward comparisons can also lead to positive or negative affect depending upon one's perceived susceptibility or fear of becoming worse off in the future. Indeed, self-relevant downward comparisons can lead to positive emotions, such as pride and happiness, by highlighting one's superior abilities (Tesser & Collins, 1988; Willis, 1981). However, downward comparisons, coupled with high perceived susceptibility to a future poor outcome, can lead to fear and worry (Buunk et al., 2005). Thus, it is clear that social comparison, which frequently occurs in the social media domain, can lead to a range of emotions based on the targets to whom one compares, the favorability of those comparisons, and additional appraisals of future outcomes.

Cumulative Emotional Experiences from Social Media Use and Well-Being

Given the incredible breadth of content disseminated through social media, its use has the capacity to evoke the full spectrum of emotional responses. However, two major emotional concerns of repeated exposure to social media center around anxiety and depression (e.g., Seabrook et al., 2016), whereas a much smaller body of literature focuses on the potential inspiring influence of social media use. We thus turn to the literature on social media use and each of these affect-based constructs.

Anxiety

Distinct from fear, which is aroused in the face of imminent, concrete, and typically physical threats (e.g., an aggressive dog), anxiety is aroused when one perceives an uncertain, existential threat (Lazarus, 1991). That is, state anxiety derives from perceptions of the environment as containing an agent threatening to some aspect of one's identity or self-concept. Research addressing how social media use relates to anxiety-related experiences is abundant and can be sorted into three main categories: the relationship between social media use and (1) general feelings of anxiety, (2) social anxiety, and (3) fear of missing out (FoMO).

Social Media and General Feelings of Anxiety

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews of social media use and anxiety have found small, positive associations between the two (Hancock et al., 2019; Keles et al., 2020), suggesting that greater social media use is associated with greater anxiety, assessed in terms of the frequency or intensity of experienced anxiety disorder symptoms (see Huang, 2022; Keles et al., 2020). Small to moderate associations between problematic social media use and anxiety have also been identified (Huang, 2022; see also Valkenburg, 2022, for a review). However, reviews of the literature suggest that the relationship between social media use and anxiety is complex, with multiple mediating and moderating factors (e.g., Keles et al., 2020).

Some critical mediating factors include sleep quality, negative affect, physical activity, and cyberbullying (e.g., Viner et al., 2019, Zhao & Zhou, 2020). For example, in a three-year longitudinal study of over 10,000 British adolescents who were 13 or 14 years old at the beginning of the study, Viner et al. (2019) found that girls who used social media more frequently reported having experienced cyberbullying more often 1 year later. The experience of being bullied online, in turn, was related to increased anxiety symptoms. Additionally, Zhao and Zhou (2020) demonstrated in a cross-sectional study that Chinese college students who were more frequent users of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced more negative affect, which in turn related to increased anxiety symptoms.

Multiple categories of moderating factors exist as well, including person-based factors (e.g., gender, sexuality), social media experience factors (e.g., cyberbullying, social support), and social media use motivation (e.g., social comparison). For example, in the aforementioned study of British adolescents, Viner et al. (2019) found that girls who reported greater social media use frequency reported greater subsequent anxiety, whereas no such relationship

was found for boys. Similarly, in a longitudinal study focusing on differences in sexual orientation, Pellicane et al. (2021) found that experiencing acceptance on social media reduced anxiety for LGBTQ+ individuals but not for heterosexual young adults.

Findings also suggest that social media use may be a double-edged sword for generating anxiety, particularly for group members who experience greater societal discrimination. That is, such use can increase the likelihood of having negative experiences, which can increase anxiety; or it might serve as a space of acceptance and thus reduce anxiety. Given that anxiety detracts from psychosocial functioning (e.g., Tsitsika et al., 2014), identifying ways in which time spent with social media can be geared toward more supportive interactions should be a priority for future research. Further, as most research in this domain is cross-sectional and often lacks a clear distinction between anxiety and other aspects of poor psychosocial functioning, longitudinal work focusing on the specific relations between social media and anxiety is needed (Valkenburg, 2022).

Social Media and Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is a specific form of state anxiety stemming from the prospect or experience of evaluation by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Given the affordances of social media, online social interactions may be structured in ways that could enhance or mitigate social anxiety. Some have argued that the asynchronous nature of social media platforms allows ample time to plan posts and minimize the need for immediate responsiveness, allowing those prone to social anxiety to practice social interactions in a less threatening environment, which could in turn mitigate social anxiety (Markovitzky et al., 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Such predictions are captured by various hypotheses, including the social compensation hypothesis (i.e., the nature of online interactions helps socially anxious individuals compensate for poorer social skills; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010), the stimulation hypothesis (i.e., the internet stimulates self-disclosure of socially anxious individuals; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), and the rehearsal hypothesis (i.e., socially anxious individuals can rehearse their social skills online; Valkenburg et al., 2011).

Others, however, have argued that social media use could have the opposite effect, suggesting that those high in social anxiety would replace anxiety-evoking, in-person interactions with mediated interactions, leading to even less social contact and thus reduced social competence (e.g., displacement hypothesis; Twenge et al., 2019). Reduced social competence would, in turn, set the stage for increased social anxiety.

Research, in fact, supports both predictions regarding the social anxiety–social media use relationship. Differences between high and low socially anxious individuals in offline contexts have been shown to persist in online interactions. Socially anxious individuals report preferring asynchronous online communication (Caplan, 2007; Szwedo et al., 2011), and they have fewer friends and feel more anxious during online interactions compared to their non-socially anxious peers (Carruthers et al., 2019; Fernandez et al., 2012). Yet, some studies suggest that socially anxious individuals can profit from online communication (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Markovitzky et al., 2012), particularly if they do not engage in passive social media use as a replacement for real interactions but rather use social media to maintain and build friendships (Koo et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017). In fact, Koo et al. (2015) found that socially anxious individuals who engaged in relational maintenance behaviors offline benefited from engaging in comparable behaviors online. However, online interactions were found to be detrimental for those who engaged in few offline relational maintenance behaviors. As such, a better understanding of the technological features that could simplify active usage and transfer to offline interactions for socially anxious individuals would be of great value.

FoMO

FoMO, or fear of missing out, is defined as the “pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent” (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841). Although incorporating the word *fear*, which is typically associated with threat of physical harm, the emotional experience of FoMO reflects more of a threat to one’s social inclusion, and thus is likely better conceptualized as a form of anxiety (Lazarus, 1991). Although FoMO is often a momentary experience in response to a specific event, individuals differ in their proneness to such apprehension, often labeled as *trait FoMO* (Fioravanti et al., 2021). As such, those high in trait FoMO are likely to experience state FoMO more often and more intensely when they know their friends are having a rewarding experience without them (Milyavskaya et al., 2018).

Given that social media is rife with content about rewarding experiences by friends and strangers alike, scholars have predicted that high–trait FoMO individuals would be particularly attracted to social media (Przybylski et al., 2013) and that social media use would increase FoMO experiences (Yin et al., 2021). Indeed, numerous studies provide evidence that high–trait FoMO individuals use social media more frequently and show increased problematic social media use (e.g., Oberst et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013). A recent meta-analysis further demonstrated that trait FoMO is positively and

moderately related to both social media use and problematic media use (Fioravanti et al., 2021). Of note, state FoMO is rarely assessed in this research (see Milyavskaya et al., 2018, for an exception).

Importantly, given that most of this research is based on cross-sectional data, little is known about the direction of the relationship between FoMO and social media use. The few experimental and longitudinal studies in this area have found mixed effects. A vignette experiment comparing situations including or omitting social media use found no differences in state FoMO (Milyavskaya et al., 2018). Similarly, a two-wave survey study found no longitudinal relationships between trait FoMO and problematic social media use (Lo Coco et al., 2020). In contrast, a different longitudinal study found that social media use predicted trait FoMO 6 months later, though FoMO did not predict subsequent social media use (Buglass et al., 2017). Thus, it remains unclear if people experiencing high trait or state FoMO start using social media more or if social media use increases state or trait FoMO. Indeed, it is possible that all four associations exist simultaneously and intensify each other.

Apart from the lack of longitudinal studies, FoMO-based research faces considerable conceptual ambiguities. First, though researchers distinguish trait and state FoMO, the state component of the most commonly used state and trait questionnaire (Wegmann et al., 2017) actually assesses a general tendency to experience FoMO on social media platforms versus in life more generally, which does not capture a true state (or momentary) experience. Second, definitions of FoMO differ in the possible timing of this experience such that it remains unclear if FoMO is only experienced when others are currently having a rewarding experience from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013) or also in advance of a social event one is deciding whether or not to attend (Neumann, 2019). Third, while the cognitive aspects of FoMO (i.e., the social comparison to others' concurrent experiences) are well conceptualized (see Neumann, 2019), the affective components are mostly limited to simply expressing that the FoMO experience is negative. Thus, it is not entirely clear if FoMO is an experience akin to anxiety, as we suggest, or is blended with other emotions, such as regret, sadness, and envy. Conceptual clarification of the FoMO concept is needed to have a more complete understanding of its role in social media experiences.

Depression

Depression is a mental illness associated with persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, and feelings of worthlessness (American

Psychiatric Association, 2013). Because of depression's far-reaching influence, substantial attention has been paid to the relationship between depression and social media use; and, like anxiety, the findings are highly variable, with some research identifying a significant association between social media use and depression and others not. Generally speaking, meta-analyses have found a positive, albeit small, relationship ($r = .11$) between depression and time spent on social media (e.g., Huang, 2017; Ivie et al., 2020; Yoon et al., 2019). Also, as with anxiety, much of the research in this area is correlational and thus ill-suited to determine if social media use causes depression or if depressed individuals are simply more likely to use social media more often. Speculation over the former is typically attributed to the idea that social media does not truly encourage social connections but rather that people are passively scrolling through social media feeds, which may generate feelings of envy and inferiority via social comparison processes (Lin et al., 2016). Regarding the latter, researchers have postulated that depressed individuals may seek out validation online due to lowered self-esteem or that they feel more comfortable in online rather than in face-to-face interactions (Lin et al., 2016). To better understand the likely complex nature of the social media use–depression relationship, it is helpful to consider the influence of different forms of social media use along with the user's life stage.

Social Media Use by Adults and Adolescents

Social media use is measured in multiple ways, including time spent on social media, frequency of checking social media platforms, and number of platforms used. Despite some variation across studies, each of these measures has been associated with depressive symptoms. Specifically, correlational studies indicate that adults who spend more time on social media, and Facebook specifically, evidence more depressive symptoms (e.g., Steers et al., 2014, Yoon et al., 2019). When participants are grouped into those with the highest and lowest amounts of time spent on social media per day, the high-use group has increased odds of showing depressive symptoms (Lin et al., 2016; though see Shensa et al., 2017, for contrasting findings). Similarly, Lin et al. (2016) and Shensa et al. (2017) found that more frequent checking of multiple social media platforms per week was associated with depression. In addition, the more social media platforms a person uses, the greater the likelihood that they have increased depression levels, even when controlling for time spent on social media (Primack, Shensa, et al., 2017). In light of the aforementioned findings, it is unsurprising that research on *problematic use*, or using social media dependently or addictively, is also positively related to depressive symptomatology (e.g., Shensa et al., 2017).

As noted previously, overwhelmingly, these findings are based on correlational data. However, in one rare example of an experimental study, Hunt et al. (2018) had adult participants limit their social media use to 10 minutes per platform per day for 3 weeks. They found that the highly depressed individuals in the control group saw no change in their symptoms over time, whereas their counterparts who limited their social media use saw declines in their depressive symptoms. A small, though not clinically significant, effect was also noted for those with lower baseline depression scores. This evidence suggests that social media use can affect depressive symptoms, particularly for those with higher levels of depression. However, additional research is needed to better understand how different forms of social media use might affect depressive symptomology.

Evidence focusing specifically on adolescents suggests similar patterns as for adults, with meta-analyses and other large-scale studies documenting a positive correlation between depressive symptoms in adolescents and time spent on social media (e.g., Huang, 2017; Ivie et al., 2020; Tsitsika et al., 2014) as well as problematic social media use (e.g., Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021). Taking a more nuanced look at the relationship between social media use and adolescent depression, a longitudinal study examined the overall correlation between social media use and depression as well as individual social media use and depression relationships across 8 years. They found that when looking at the full sample of adolescents, hours spent on social media per day was moderately positively related to depression. Yet when examining within-person changes, they found that a shift in an adolescent's usual time spent on media was not followed by a change in their usual level of depression (Coyne et al., 2020). These results indicate that the positive relationship between social media use and depression found in cross-sectional studies may be a function of broader characteristics of the individual (e.g., biological predisposition, lack of coping mechanisms, prolonged exposure to stress, traumatic experiences) influencing or predicting both social media and depression separately, rather than depression and social media use influencing each other. Clearly, more longitudinal research is needed to understand the link between these two variables.

Despite the ample evidence that social media use and depression are related for both adults and adolescents, several studies have found no relationship between the same social media use measures and depression under various specific conditions. For example, for adults, research has found that using social media in bed on mobile devices (Bhat et al., 2018), quantity of interactions (Davila et al., 2012), and Instagram use frequency (Rozgonjuk et al., 2020) are not associated with depression. For adolescents, there was no relationship

between depression and active or passive social media behaviors (Rideout & Fox, 2018); social media-based social support (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021); social media use frequency (Rideout & Fox, 2018); or social media activities, age, or gender (Banjanin et al., 2015). Thus, it is clear that the relationship between social media use and depression is complicated, and future research would do well to examine key potential moderators.

Social Media Use–Depression Relationship Explanations

In light of the evidence supporting the relationship between social media use and depression, scholars have proposed several reasons why this relationship emerges, including general negative experiences and social comparison. For instance, Primack, Bisbey, et al. (2017) found that those who have had negative experiences on social media (e.g., negative interactions with close friends and romantic partners) showed increased odds for negative affect and depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2012). Interestingly, the role of positive experiences is mixed, with some research showing no relationship (Primack, Bisbey, et al., 2017) and others showing an ameliorative relationship between positive experiences and depression (Davila et al., 2012).

Social comparison on social media has also been shown to relate to depressive symptoms (Yoon et al., 2019). For instance, research has shown that married adults (W. Wang et al., 2020) and mothers (Coyne et al., 2017) who compare themselves on social media to those they think are superior have higher depressive symptomology. Social comparison also mediates the relationship between the number of Facebook logins and depressive symptoms, regardless of gender (Steers et al., 2014), perhaps due to increased rumination, which is a hallmark of depression (Feinstein et al., 2013). Further, those who spend more time engaged in impression management by trying to curate their self-image online also report more depressive symptoms (Rosen et al., 2013).

Because adolescents are developing their self-concepts and are heavily reliant on peer relationships, factors related to both can influence social media-related depression, including age, FoMO, cyberbullying, surveillance, and appearance-related activities. For instance, evidence suggests that FoMO mediates the link between depression and social media use (Oberst et al., 2017). As well, social media cyberbullying is associated with depressive symptoms (Hamm et al., 2015). Further, teens who are trying to manage their sexual identity on social media feel more depressed if they are outed or excluded online (Rubin & McClelland, 2015), and teens who participate in more appearance-related social media activities are more likely to have increased depressive symptoms (Hawes et al., 2020).

How people interact with social media also makes a difference in their depressive symptoms. For example, those who are more emotionally invested in social media (e.g., Alsunni & Latif, 2021) and those who have more social media friends with whom they have no in-person contact (Shensa et al., 2018) are more likely to have increased depressive symptoms. In addition, if people scroll through social media passively, they are more likely to have elevated depressive symptoms (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; though see Aslbers et al., 2019, for an alternative perspective). Interestingly, there is mixed evidence of active social media use (i.e., posting, commenting, etc.), with some studies finding no relationship (e.g., Escobar-Viera et al., 2018) and others finding active use of social media to talk with family and friends associated with less depression than other social media uses, such as information seeking and gameplay (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Finally, evidence suggests that existing depression is associated with worsening effects of social media use for both adults and adolescents, as they find it stress-inducing (Radovic et al., 2017; Rideout & Fox, 2018) and a trigger for social comparison and dampened self-esteem, which generate additional negative emotions, such as envy (Radovic et al., 2017). Indeed, despite their use of social media to meet certain needs—like to distract themselves with humorous content, to complain or rant, or to avoid talking to people in person (Radovic et al., 2017)—depressed teens are more likely to indicate that social media use makes them feel worse (Rideout & Fox, 2018).

Mitigating Depressive Symptoms

Despite contradictory results, some studies have found benefits of social media use that can lower depressive symptoms. For instance, those who have more Facebook friends (Rosen et al., 2013), feel more social connectedness on Facebook (Grieve et al., 2013), and feel socially supported or accepted via social media (e.g., Pellicane et al., 2021; Shensa et al., 2020) experience fewer depressive symptoms. In addition, some individuals choose to participate in social media health communities, which can lower depression, as these groups give individuals a sense of belonging and diminish feelings of isolation (Lu et al., 2021).

Finally, extant research shows that for depressed adolescents there are a number of benefits related to social media use in light of positive content and social support. Depressed adolescents report using social media to seek out positive media content, such as humor or entertainment (Radovic et al., 2017). As well, depressed teens say that social media helps them feel less alone, get inspiration from others, and express themselves (Radovic et al., 2017; Rideout & Fox, 2018). More than non-depressed adolescents, depressed adolescents

say it is easier to communicate with people on social media (Rideout & Fox, 2018). They use social media to keep in touch with family and friends, find support groups, and look for mental health information (Radovic et al., 2017). Thus, despite the risk of social media use creating or intensifying depressive symptoms, it is clear that the nature and context of both social media use and interactions have the potential to confer benefits as well.

Hope and Inspiration

Overwhelmingly, research on social media and emotional experiences focuses on negative impacts, and benefits tend to be framed in terms of reduction of negative affect. For example, apart from what has been mentioned previously, there is emerging evidence that, under certain circumstances and usage, social media use may reduce feelings of loneliness, for example, in specific life stages and when used actively and for shorter periods of time (e.g., Deters & Mehl, 2013; Vally & D'Souza, 2019; K. Wang et al., 2018). However, there is a small but growing area of research examining positive emotional responses to social media experiences, including the evocation of hope and inspiration.

Hope is the feeling of “yearning for relief from a negative situation, or for the realization of a positive outcome when the odds do not greatly favor it” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 282). Despite the unfavorable contexts in which it tends to arise, hope provides a sense that one can improve one’s situation (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988). Thus, it is often seen as an emotional coping mechanism useful in circumstances that are otherwise threatening or stressful (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). In fact, there is much evidence associating both trait- and state-based hope with beneficial psychological outcomes, including increased quality of life (Rustoen & Wiklund, 2000) and mental wellness (Brackney & Westman, 1992). Often, hope comes from inspiring figures in one’s environment (mediated or otherwise), and thus consideration of inspiration from social media content is of tremendous interest.

There is a small body of literature that considers how social media use may generate hope or inspiration in ways that benefit the psychological well-being of social media users (see Chapter 12, this volume). Such desired outcomes may emerge primarily through three routes: social comparison, meaningful experiences, and social support. Regarding social comparison, Meier and Schäfer (2018) found that intensity of social comparison within the context of nature and travel Instagram posts generated inspiration, which was fully mediated by benign (or non-malicious) envy. Such inspiration was further associated with other positive affects and indicators of well-being.

Additionally, the social support offered by others online, particularly to those who are struggling with challenges and who have fewer resources in their actual environment, is a source of hope and inspiration for social media users. For example, Naslund et al. (2014) found that people with mental illness who turned to YouTube for peer support not only experienced reduced isolation but also experienced more hope, presumably in light of the emotional and information support they received.

Finally, social media is replete with examples of inspirational stories, memes, and other content that uplifts those who consume them. Often, users come across this content by chance, but it can also be sought out or even “prescribed” to an audience (e.g., Prestin & Nabi, 2020). For example, Rieger and Klimmt (2019) found that exposure to meaningful and inspiring memes increased participants’ meaningful affective experiences. Further, Prestin and Nabi (2020) found that providing students with short, 5-minute inspiring YouTube videos, once a day for 5 days, not only increased feelings of hope but led to decreased reported stress and increased goal pursuit the following week. Similar findings emerged among a sample of US adults (Nabi et al., 2022). Although promising, each of these research areas is in its nascency, and much research remains to be done to understand the conditions under which social media use can be harnessed for positive emotional arousal and its related beneficial downstream effects.

Conclusion

As in life, social media experiences have the capacity to evoke the full range of human emotions. The existing empirical evidence raises alarm bells, suggesting that social media engagement harms users’ well-being with its links to anxiety, depression, loneliness, envy, and so forth. However, a careful read of the literature makes it clear that these conclusions are far from absolute. If the question is “Does social media cause emotional harm?” the answer is, yes. And no. And it depends. The potential for both harm and benefit are there. The question we need to ask is “Under what circumstances does what type of social media use harm/benefit which audiences and in what ways?” Issues of time spent, number of social media platforms used, and frequency of logins are important to consider, as are motivations for use, content consumed, active and passive use, existing psychological predispositions, and the relationship of social media use relative to real-world interactions, among other factors. This chapter only scratches the surface of a highly complex phenomenon. Ultimately, we feel confident concluding that social media is a tool

for emotional arousal and expression. How to best use that tool for emotional gains and with minimal emotional cost is perhaps one of the most pressing challenges in our field of study. Our hope is that future research will build on the existing corpus of research with careful attention to potential moderators and with longitudinal designs to allow greater insight into how best to harness the potential of social media use to support emotional well-being.

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