



Mental Health in Motion: Examining Daily Social Media Use and Stress in College Students

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How does daily social media use relate to momentary mental health experiences, particularly stress, among college students in their natural daily environments?

BACKGROUND

College students in emerging adulthood are at increased risk for stress and mental health challenges due to academic and social pressures (Arnett, 2000; Lipson et al., 2019). Social media plays a major role in daily life and has been linked to both positive and negative psychological outcomes, including increased stress with excessive use (Kross et al., 2013; Primack et al., 2017). However, most research relies on retrospective reports, which may not capture how stress changes in real time. This study examines how daily social media use relates to end-of-day stress among undergraduate students using real-world assessments.

METHODS

Undergraduate college students will be recruited through the university's psychology research participation system. After providing electronic informed consent and completing a brief baseline questionnaire, participants will install the MediaHealth mobile application, which will passively track daily smartphone and social media usage patterns throughout the study period.

Each evening, participants will complete a brief self-report stress assessment using the Daily Inventory of Stressful Events (DISE) to capture day-to-day fluctuations in perceived stress. This repeated daily design allows for the examination of real-world associations between objectively measured social media engagement and momentary mental health experiences. Daily screen-time metrics will be combined with end-of-day stress reports. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analyses will be conducted to examine relationships between digital behavior and daily stress levels among participants.

Your screen time may be shaping your stress day by day, through everyday digital habits



EXPECTED RESULTS

It is expected that higher levels of daily social media use will be associated with increased end-of-day stress among college students. Specifically, greater time spent on social media is predicted to correspond with higher stress scores on the Daily Inventory of Stressful Events (DISE). These findings would suggest that fluctuations in digital behavior are linked to short-term changes in mental health in real-world settings.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should examine how different types of social media use (e.g., active vs. passive use) relate to stress in daily life. Expanding the study to more diverse populations and longer time periods would improve generalizability. Additionally, incorporating other mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety or mood) and using advanced real-time data analysis methods may provide a deeper understanding of how digital behavior influences well-being.

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