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**THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE
MENTAL HEALTH OF ROMANIAN TEENAGERS,
EMERGING ADULTS, AND ADULTS**

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Abstract: In recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms has changed the way individuals communicate, share information, and connect with one another. A large body of literature has examined the effects of social media use, particularly among adolescents, resulting in largely negative and some positive mental health outcomes. These effects include addiction, symptoms of depression and anxiety, low body image and self-esteem, and positive connections with others. This paper surveyed N = 107 Romanian social media users and found extensive use and consumption of social media networks. Despite being aware of their addictive nature, users reported not experiencing any negative effects on their mental health or being cyberbullied, while recognizing some positive effects. In addition, the experts interviewed warned against the high incidence of social media addiction and provided alternatives for users to limit their time on the platforms.

Keywords: social networks, mental health, self-esteem, social media use, Romania.

EFECTELE PERCEPUTE ALE REȚELELOR SOCIALE ASUPRA SĂNĂTĂȚII MENTALE A ADOLESCENȚILOR, ADULȚILOR EMERGENȚI ȘI ADULȚILOR ROMÂNI

Rezumat: În ultimii ani, proliferarea platformelor de socializare a schimbat modul în care indivizii comunică, împărtășesc informații și intră în contact unii cu alții. O mare parte din literatura de specialitate a examinat efectele utilizării social media, în special în rândul adolescenților, care au avut ca rezultat rezultate în mare parte negative și în unele cazuri pozitive în ceea ce privește sănătatea mintală. Aceste efecte includ dependența, simptome de depresie și anxietate, imagine corporală și stimă de sine scăzute și conexiuni pozitive cu ceilalți. Această lucrare a intervievat N = 107 utilizatori români de social media și a constatat o utilizare și un consum extins al rețelelor de socializare. În ciuda faptului că sunt conștienți de natura lor adictivă, utilizatorii au raportat că nu au experimentat efecte negative asupra sănătății lor mintale sau de a fi fost hărțuiți cibernetic, recunoscând în același timp unele efecte pozitive. În plus, experții intervievați au avertizat împotriva incidenței ridicate a dependenței de social media și au oferit alternative pentru ca utilizatorii să își limiteze timpul petrecut pe aceste platforme.

Cuvinte-cheie: rețele sociale, sănătate mintală, stima de sine, utilizarea social media, România.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms has transformed how individuals communicate, share information, and connect with one another. Numerous studies have explored the relationship between social media and user habits in relation to mental health effects. While negative effects are largely posited in relation to excessive use of social networks, positive effects have also been found and need to be considered when discussing implications and policies for users.

The current paper surveys Romanian social media users in order to map their awareness and perceptions of negative influences in terms of addiction, feelings of depression, cyberbullying, body image and self-esteem, as well as positive influences on their relationships.

2. Theoretical Background

Scholars have increasingly been interested in linking excessive social media use and feelings of loneliness. Twenge argued that more frequent users of social media show lower psychological well-being than those less engaged with social media; less investment in activities that are more beneficial to well-being, such as sleep or face-to-face interaction, as well as negative phenomena occurring on these platforms, such as social comparison and cyberbullying, can explain this link¹. Similarly, Twenge and Campbell identified a significant correlation between high social media used and increased loneliness and depressive symptoms among teenagers, as high social media time can enhance feelings of isolation². Moreover, high users display less curiosity, less self-control, and less emotional stability than those scoring lower screen time on social media platforms. Among youth, social media use has been recurrently found to be linked to depression and anxiety symptoms, as well as greater stress³. However, the relationship between social media use and self-esteem may be

overshadowed by other factors: adolescents experiencing heavy restrictive mediation of media by their parents or have limited Internet access at home report lower self-esteem than heavy social media users⁴.

Young adults with high social media use experience increased feelings of social isolation and decreased self-esteem, even though it may be possible that those who already feel socially isolated tend to dedicate more time to social media⁵. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the context led to an augmentation of social media use; higher levels of digital media addiction came along with higher ill-being⁶. However, involvement in social media identity bubbles during difficult times such as the Covid-19 pandemic led to lower loneliness and distress⁷.

At the same time, the “Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO) phenomenon is closely related to social media use and mental well-being; individuals experiencing FOMO tend to report lower life satisfaction and mood, being also associated with distracted driving and increased use of social media during lectures⁸. This fear-driven behavior may generate anxiety and stress. Increased use of Facebook was found detrimental to students’ mental health, leading to impairments to academic performance⁹.

Looking at previous research linking social media use with cyberbullying and its negative effects, Hamm et al. found significant associations between cyberbullying and depression, while the most common reason for the latter consists in relationship issues and targets female recipients¹⁰. Thus, there is a strong connection between victimization and psychological distress among adolescents, the detrimental effects of online harassment including decreased self-esteem and increased emotional distress¹¹.

One prominent theme in the literature is the role of social comparison in shaping self-esteem on social media. Fardouly and Vartanian showed that social media use is consistently and positively associated with negative body image, especially when engaging in social comparison¹². Moreover, spending time on Facebook generates a negative mood and a great desire to change their face, hair, and skin-related features¹³. Thus, individuals engaging in upward social comparison on social media platforms leads to decreased self-esteem

and increased body dissatisfaction.

It is essential, however, to recognize that social media may also bear positive implications for mental health. For instance, Verduyn et al. found that using social media for social interaction and connection correlates with increased well-being and life satisfaction, thus showing potential for constructive use¹⁴. When active use of social media predicts individuals' well-being, it capitalizes on its potential of creating social capital and making people feel connected. During Covid-19, social media use helped foster one-to-one communication, online friendship, and positive experiences to release stress¹⁵.

3. Research Design

Through this research, the authors aimed to identify the perceived negative effects that social networks might have on individuals from different age cohorts and how they affect mental health. To investigate the negative impact social media has on individuals, a survey was designed and conducted. To further analyze the negative influence of social networks, an interview was carried out with 3 experts in the field of psychology.

Based on literature at the intersection of social media use, effects of this behavior, and mental health, a series of research questions and hypotheses were established, to be addressed in the present paper, via the two research methods employed complementarily:

RQ1: To what extent are Romanian social media users aware of the negative impact of social networks on mental health?

H1: Romanian social media users are widely aware that the use of social media can lead to addiction.

RQ2: To what extent are Romanian social media users affected by this negative impact?

H2: Romanian social media users have felt depressed at least once because of social media.

H3: Romanian SNS users are influenced by social media in a negative way, in terms of body image and self-confidence.

H4: Romanian social media users are highly exposed to

cyberbullying.

H5: Romanian SNS users use social networks to build relationships.

RQ3: To what extent does the overuse of social media affect Romanian youth?

4. Results

Survey. The survey instrument designed to include 15 variables on social networking and its impact on individuals was posted and distributed online, on Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook, in May 2022, obtaining N = 107 valid answers. The sample was a non-probability one, constituted through self-selection, and the survey started with a section for participants' informed consent. Respondents were 52.3% female, 45.8% male, and nearly 2% did not specify their gender.

Most respondents fell into the 18 to 21-year-old age category (59.8%), followed by respondents between 22 and 45 years old (35.5%), and teenagers aged between 15 and 18 (4.6%). In terms of background, 67.3% of respondents came from urban settings, 27.1% from rural areas, and 5.6% chose not to offer this data. Most responses came from individuals identifying as students (46.7%), followed by workers/ employees (30.8%), and pre-university students with 21.5%.

In terms of general time spent on social platforms, results showed that 90.65% of our respondents have been using Facebook for over 3 years, followed by Instagram and YouTube, less frequented by them. Nearly 80% of respondents were not Twitter users, and 26% have been using TikTok extensively, for over a year. In terms of daily consumption of social media, Instagram was the most favored platform, with nearly 70% of users declaring they access it and spend time on it several times a day, followed by Facebook (57.97%), TikTok and YouTube (each with 43.92%). Self-reporting their total daily social media time, 40.2% of respondents claimed spending between 2 and 4 hours, 33.6% between 4 and 6 hours, 14% less than 2 hours, and 12.1% extensively, for more than 6 hours.

In terms of their perception of social networks influence upon mental health, most respondents (72%) expressed their certainty that social networks have a negative influence on mental health, 20.6% expressing the contrary, and 7.5% refusing to assess this aspect. Prompted about potential positive effects of social media on mental health, 60.7% of respondents did feel that positive effects existed in addition to the negative ones, 28% disagreed that social networks bear any positive effects on mental health, and 11.2% refused to offer an assessment.

As for generating addiction, 40.2% of respondents fully agreed that social networks are addictive, while another 43% moderately agreed. Only 2.8% of individuals surveyed disagreed, illustrating an overwhelming awareness the addictive character of social media. Further and more specifically, respondents were asked about effects such as depression and anxiety. 34.6% of individuals surveyed fully agreed and 25.2% agreed that social network use can cause these negative phenomena, while 15.9% only partially agreed, and 4.7% disagreed. Thus, there is a high level of agreement on a link between social network use and depression and anxiety. Regarding their own experience of depression due to social media, 57.9% denied ever experiencing that. More than 1 in 4 respondents related to this experience, whereas 15% refused to offer an answer.

In terms of social networking influence on body image and self-esteem, 34.6%, respectively 29.9% fully and moderately agreed that there is such a relationship, whereas only 4.7% disagreed. Asked about their own experience with social networks in relation to their body image and self-esteem, 51.4% of individuals rejected such an experience, while 32.7% of respondents disclosed an existing influence, and 15.9% refused to provide an answer.

Regarding excessive social media consumption and the quality of sleep, 46.7% of respondents confirmed that overuse affected their sleep, while 40.2% answered in the negative, with 13.1% still refusing to answer. Thus, most respondents reported a link between overuse of social media and low sleep quality. Another variable tackled cyber-bullying: asked if they had been victims of this phenomenon, the vast majority (67.3%) denied such an experience. Only 1 in 10 respondents

admitted having been harassed on social networks, and more than 1 in 5 respondents did not want to provide an answer.

On the positive side, respondents were prompted to provide their view on social media facilitating new relationships, which can improve mental health, on which 53.5% of individuals surveyed fully agreed. Only one respondent disagreed. Asked if they had ever experience support via social networks or mental health support groups, 51.4% declared not having experienced that, a large cohort (31.8%) refused to answer, and less than 1 in 5 respondents declared having received support through social networks or mental health support groups.

Lastly, the variable related to respondents' strategies to limit their time spent on social media, 41.1% declared having successfully done so, 35.5% of respondents confessed to trying, but failing, and the rest denied any attempt to limit their time spent on social media. For various of the variables included in the survey, the number of non-responsive individuals was significant; this may be explained by the topics being too sensitive or uncomfortable, or the respondents not having reflected enough in order to offer an answer; moreover, the question phrasing might have influenced non-responses, which is a limitation to the survey method employed in this research. To complement these findings, expert interviews were carried out.

Interview. An interview was carried out in the timeframe after the survey analysis (summer of 2022) to map expert perspectives on social media use of individuals and its impact. The three experts are scholars and practitioners in various areas of psychology and will be henceforth referred to as A. P. (lecturer, female), C. C. (assistant, female), and I. S. (professor, male). The interviews aimed to analyze the impact of social platforms on individuals, especially on youth, and on aspects related to their mental health. The interview consisted of nine questions, framed based on literature and on the survey results.

Risks of social network overuse. The experts offered similar views on this variable, discussing isolation, low self-esteem, emotional disturbances and behavioral changes, lack of attention, reduced school performance, physical health problems, and disturbed sleep patterns to describe common effects of spending too much time on social

media. C. C. (assistant, female) argued that the amount of time youth has been devoting to social media has increased at a fantastic rate and has enabled them to enhance their networking activity.

Social media addiction among youth. C. C. relies on previous studies to explain why this occurs, arguing that symptoms of addiction emerge when the disadvantages of social media use overcome the advantages, or when users feel the need to access them incessantly. Moreover, I. S. (professor, male) sees an increasing trend in this behavior, as shown by students and parents asking for help after an unprecedented increase of online time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The expert also pointed to research showing that 1 in 4 young people are addicted to social networks, yet do not want to admit to it. This might be an explanation for some of our survey results.

Social media and depression. C. C. discussed a study from 2015 involving nearly 500 teenagers, showing that increased daily social media use and too much emotional involvement in social media leads to sleep disturbances at night, as well as reduced self-esteem, high anxiety, and depression. I. S. also agreed that such negative effects are common:

“I think this has gone very far. It has been observed that this addiction can cause changes in the area of the brain associated with young people’s attention, planning, and prioritization of actions. There are studies suggesting that people who suffer from internet addiction have similar brain changes to those addicted to drugs or gambling. These changes in the brain explain why young people with addictions put this addiction above basic everyday things like school, eating, sleeping, meeting friends. All this leads to depression.”

Social media overuse and self-esteem. A. P. (female, lecturer) argued that some of the reasons for low self-esteem among youth are social comparison, social pressure, beauty standards, trends such as body shaming or body positivity, use of filters, or cyberbullying. Moreover, C. C. explained social comparison and youth behavior when accessing social networks, feeling less good than those with whom they compare themselves, as normally individuals tend to highlight

only the good aspects of their lives on social media. This leads to an unrealistic view and makes social media audiences feel like their lives are less good, leading to lower self-esteem. I. S. adds the ease with which people compare their lives to artificially enhanced images of these equally artificial lives, leading to difficulties in receiving constructive feedback, lack of acknowledgment for one's mistakes, reluctance to interactions, and aggression in expression of one's needs and expectations.

Low body image among individuals. Asked for advice for people confronted with this phenomenon, A. P. advised for specialized help and proper information; even online resources could be supportive, but individuals should be critical of the quality of information and the sources. According to the expert, surrounding themselves with good people, with family and friends who can offer support is essential. C. C. suggested reducing the time spent on social networks and choosing actual offline activities instead. I. S. advised for acceptance as one really is, talking to others about these problems; overexposure leads to negative emotions, even if the rational part of the mind knows that what is shown online is an idealized version of the self.

Cyberbullying/ social media harassment. Regarding tools people can use to overcome such situations, A. P. stressed keeping oneself informed again, as well as reaching out for therapy or peer support when feeling overwhelmed. C. C. recommended action such as blocking the harasser, and I. S. talked about programs designed to prevent and support them in situations of online abuse, aimed to raise awareness on the impact of the new technologies, to provide the public with information and resources needed to create a safer internet setting, to harmonize the Romanian legislation and practices with European standards through cooperation of various actors.

Social media and new relationships. The experts warned that relationships created via online platforms might not be all beneficial. A. P. argued that many online relationships do not automatically translate into quality relationships, and C. C. added that offline relationships are clearly superior to online ones. Conversely, I. S. emphasized that virtual communication may make physical distances disappear,

enabling relationships to form and continue, thus providing opportunities to promote ideas, businesses, projects, or information.

Setting limits to social media consumption. A. P. offered a variety of ideas and tools for individuals to reduce their social media time: "By cultivating positive relationships, personal values, hobbies, offline activities, volunteering, internships, service learning, experiential learning, non-formal, informal, and formal education, sports, or practicing a balanced and healthy lifestyle." C. C. suggested proper time management as essential in accomplishing this, and I. S. also recommended people should use that time for other activities.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Although the data analysis for the survey is descriptive, results can be discussed in relation to the research questions and hypotheses and complemented by the interview results. A wide majority of respondents agreed upon the negative impact of social media on mental health, and some of these negative influences were addiction, depression, anxiety, low body image or quality of sleep. However, one explanation for the survey results can rely on the third-person effect¹⁶, as most respondents stated that social media had not affected them personally in terms of experiencing depression or low body image; they did, however, admit to negative influences upon their sleep quality. By and large, awareness of the social networks' capacity to trigger addiction was rather high, yet the vast majority of respondents denied having faced cyberbullying. Optimism was found among respondents in terms of their belief regarding new relationships formed via social networks. Through the interviews, the negative impact of social networks on young people's mental health was explored, drawing from the experts' experience on the topic. Results showed that excessive use of social networks is detrimental to young people's mental health, and advice was offered for social media users to exert more caution in dealing with social networks and enhancing their engagement in offline activities.

Future research could use experimental settings to test for negative and positive effects of social media use, and more sophisticated statistical analyses on larger and probabilistic samples could bring a more nuanced understanding to the phenomenon of social media use in relation to mental health. Although this paper gave rather cautious interpretations of the data collected, it is quite reasonable that the third-person effect can explain part of why, although aware of all the risks, young social media users tend to deny influences upon self and accept influences upon others. One alternative explanation could be that this particular cohort has a high level of digital literacy, and hence, holds sophisticated tools for self-protection on social media; future studies could rely on this explanation and explore it.

Notes:

¹ Jean M. Twenge, 2019, "More time on technology, less happiness? Associations between digital-media use and psychological well-being" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28 (4): 372-379.

² Jean M. Twenge & W. Keith Campbell, 2018, "Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study" in *Preventive medicine reports*, 12: 271-283.

³ Youngrong Lee, Ye Jin Jeon, Sunghyuk Kang, Jae Il Shin, Young-Chul Jung & Sun Jae Jung, 2022, "Social media use and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in young adults: a meta-analysis of 14 cross-sectional studies", *BMC Public Health*, 22(1): 995; Holly Shannon, Katie Bush, Villeneuve, Paul J., Kim G.C. Hellemans & Synthia Guimond, 2022, "Problematic social media use in adolescents and young adults: systematic review and meta-analysis" in *JMIR mental health*, 9(4): e33450.

⁴ Keith N. Hampton & Inyoung Shin, 2023, "Disconnection more problematic for adolescent self-esteem than heavy social media use: Evidence from access inequalities and restrictive media parenting in rural America" in *Social Science Computer Review*, 41(2): 626-647.

⁵ Brian A. Primack, Ariel Shensa, Jaime E. Sidani, Erin O. Whaite, Liu yi Lin,

Daniel Rosen, Jason B. Colditz, Ana Radovic & Elizabeth Miller, 2017, "Social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the US" in *American journal of preventive medicine*, 53(1): 1-8.

⁶ Laura Marciano, Michelle Ostroumova, Peter Johannes Schulz & Anne-Linda Camerini, 2022, "Digital media use and adolescents' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic review and meta-analysis" in *Frontiers in public health*, 9: 793868.

⁷ Rita Latikka, Aki Koivula, Reetta Oksa, Nina Savela & Atte Oksanen. 2022. "Loneliness and psychological distress before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: Relationships with social media identity bubbles". *Social Science & Medicine*, 293: 114674.

⁸ Andrew K. Przybylski, Kou Murayama, Cody R. DeHaan & Valerie Gladwell, 2013, "Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out" in *Computers in human behavior*, 29(4): 1841-1848.

⁹ Luca Braghieri, Ro'ee Levy & A. Makarin, 2022, "Social media and mental health" in *American Economic Review*, 112(11): 3660-3696.

¹⁰ Michelle P. Hamm, Amanda S. Newton, Annabritt Chisholm, Jocelyn Shulhan, Andrea Milne, Purnima Sundar, Heather Ennis, Shannon D. Scott & Lisa Hartling, 2015, "Prevalence and effect of cyberbullying on children and young people: A scoping review of social media studies" in *JAMA pediatrics*, 169(8): 770-777.

¹¹ Wanda Cassidy, Chantal Faucher & Margaret Jackson, 2023, "The social, cultural and institutional contexts of cyberbullying and online harassment" in *Cyberbullying and Online Harms: Preventions and Interventions from Community to Campus*.

¹² Jasmine Fardouly & Lenny R. Vartanian, 2016, "Social media and body image concerns: Current research and future directions" in *Current opinion in psychology*, 9: 1-5.

¹³ Jasmine Fardouly, Phillippa C. Diedrichs, Lenny R. Vartanian & Emma Halliwell, 2015, "Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood" in *Body image*, 13: 38-45.

¹⁴ Philippe Verduyn, Oscar Ybarra, Maxime Résibois, John Jonides & Ethan Kross, 2017, "Do social network sites enhance or undermine subjective well-being? A critical review". *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 11(1), 274-302.

¹⁵ Laura Marciano, Michelle Ostroumova, Peter Johannes Schulz & Anne-Linda Camerini, 2022, "Digital media use and adolescents' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic review and meta-analysis" in *Frontiers in public health*, 9: 793868.

¹⁶ Azi Lev-On, 2017, "The third-person effect on Facebook: The significance of perceived proficiency" in *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(4): 252-260.

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