Introduction

*Research Topic*

The topical focus of this research was “The Attitudes of College Students Regarding Social Media Usage”. Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of almost all American college students. It is used as a communication tool between peers and family members, an outlet for seeking short form entertainment, and a channel for news and information. This topic was chosen in part due to the popularity of social media among college students and the general lack of discussion on the ways it plays a part in their routines. There was an expectation that both positive and negative aspects of social media would be discussed and that these attitudes would differ between students of varying gender identities and sexualities. In the end, the hope was to open the discussion of both positives and negatives of social media to then share the similarities and differences discovered which in turn could provide a greater understanding for why these different demographic group feel one way or another about social media and its various platforms.

*Literature Review*

The anthropological literature surrounding social media tends to fall into two categories: mental health and social media or communication and social media. The subfield of anthropology that studies the internet is considered relatively new and can go by several different names. The most common name used, however, is digital anthropology. Daniel Miller is a prominent digital anthropologist who collaborated with anthropologists across the globe to study the global impact of what he described as “new social media” in a project called Why We Post. The project sought to study the content posted and the importance of content in communication to determine the reasons why people post on social media (Miller et. al 2016). Miller and his colleagues focus specifically on the phenomenon of social media posts and how it differs across the globe. It does not cover the United States and does not discuss in detail the age grouping of college students, roughly between 18 to 22.

It is also important to note that many of the studies completed regarding social media were not done in the last five years and thus focus on platforms that are not popular for college students today, such as Facebook, or are no longer in existence, like Myspace. An example of this would be the social study by Fenne Deters and Matthias Mehl from 2012 which studies Facebook and loneliness. The study was done completely through Facebook and determined that posting status updates created a sense of interconnectedness with friends and family even without direct contact (Deters et al. 2012). By specifically focusing on social media usage among college students, we can update the conversation by discussing the newest or most popular social media platforms and study the group that objectively uses social media the most.

*Research Questions*

Throughout the research, the goal was to determine what role social media plays in the lives of college students, how often social media was used and when was social media usage most prevalent, what the specific positive and negative feelings or experiences that come from using social media are and how do these feelings and experiences differ between gender identity and sexuality. These questions were different than the questions originally posed prior to beginning research. The research questions changed as interviews began and stayed the same until the end. The original questions asked were: What is the role of social media in communication in the daily lives of college aged adults, and how does gender identity change the experiences on social media for college aged adults? These questions did not feel substantial enough to use within the interviews, so they were scrapped and replaced with the five questions stated above.

*Interview Schedule*

For the interview schedule, the questions were broken up into three categories: demographic information, usage, and personal experience. By breaking the questions into these sections, the interview could be easily guided from one question to another based on the topic. Inside the sections were between three and four in depth questions that corresponded to the category.

*IRB, CITI, and Hypothesis*

To conduct research with human subjects, it is required for the researcher to become certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative and receive approval from Longwood University’s Institutional Review Board. CITI certification involves passing quizzes on multiple topics discussing ethics and research methods. After earning a CITI certification, a research proposal was submitted to the Institutional review board and received approval. The hypothesis for this research was that the linguistic analysis will reflect patterns in the college student’s attitudes and ideas about social media.

*Interview Process*

Over the course of the research, seven interviews were conducted with interviewees from different universities, gender identities, and sexualities. Six of the seven interviews were conducted through zoom and one interview was conducted in person. The interviews were then recorded through the transcription website Otter. The transcriptions were then edited to ensure accuracy for analysis. Transcriptions were run through the software KH Coder to analyze the linguistic data. One problem faced during the process was that some questions were worded in a way in which the subjects were answering them in a few words rather than elaborating. The subjects were asked to elaborate more, but there was not much more given. To overcome this, the questions were reworded for the following interviews and the new questions were asked as follow up for the interviews which were not asked these questions originally. At times, there was a struggle to understand the KH Coder software, but through the help of fellow classmates, the software became easier to use.

Analysis and Results

*Patterns in Analysis*

Throughout the interviews, several patterns arose. The most commonly shared experience was what is known as “hate commenting”. This is a phenomenon that mirrors cyberbullying. An example of the on platforms such as TikTok, viewers may leave rude or hateful remarks on a video that they watch, either about the creator themselves or the content of the video. An unexpected pattern occurred between the males interviewed. Both males mentioned the feeling of body dysmorphia or a newly gained negative self-image. It was expected that this phenomenon would occur between the females or gender fluid participants. Overall, all the subjects believed they overused social media.

*KH Coder*

Following the completion of transcribing the interviews, the information was uploaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and given variables. The variables used were gender identity, sexuality, college/university, and grade. From there, the spreadsheet could be uploaded into KH Coder and analyzed. After an initial analysis, a stop words list was created to weed out any words without significant value to the data.

*Word Frequency List*

The first look into the analyzed data was through the word frequency list tool. This tool lists each word in order of the frequency used. The top five words used were, “people”, “social media”, “day”, “feel”, and “Instagram”. People was used a total of 29 times and was followed by media and social a total of 28 times each. People was used to discuss the population that uses social media generally, rather than specifics. All seven interviewed subjects talked broadly about people rather than being specific in their descriptions of their experiences. Social media was combined to force recognize as one term as every time the words social and media were used, it was as the phrase social media. This was expected as the topic of the interviews centered around social media. Day was third most popular with 22 uses. Day was used to describe what times social media was used to most. Feel was fourth on the list with 19 uses and this was also expected. The questions of the final portion of the interview centered around feelings and experiences, thus leading to the participants describing how they feel.

*Co-occurrence Networks*

A co-occurrence network is a mapping of words into clusters based on how closely words are related to each other within the conversations. In the Word-to-Word co-occurrence network, a few clusters that stood out were the clusters “negative” and “scroll”, “brain” and “break”, and “app” and “bored”. These are all connected under one theme: the idea that using social media is a way to pass time. In the cluster of “negative” and “scroll”, this seems connected to the mindless scrolling that can come from social media, which multiple participants noted as being a negative aspect. One participant specifically categorized social media to give their brain a break, hence the cluster of “brain” and “break”. One unexpected cluster was “Instagram”, “Snapchat”, and “Twitter” and their separation from “Facebook”, “Pinterest”, and “Tiktok”. There was not a strong indication within the interviews that these platforms were more closely related then the other three. It was interesting to find this separation within the co-occurrence network.

When analyzing the co-occurrence network with the sexuality variable, a difference arose between the straight participants and the pansexual and queer participants. Both the queer and pansexual participants used negative words more often compared to the straight participants. Some words these two groups used were, “Hate”, “Amplify”, “Bad”, and “Procrastination”. This was not an expected outcome, as there was a belief that all subjects would use a mix of negative and positive words.

*Conclusion*

Throughout the research process, small patterns arose between groups of varying identities. The hypothesis of this research was that the linguistic analysis will reflect patterns in the college student’s attitudes and ideas about social media. Within the word frequency list, an emphasis on feelings was seen as the word “feel” itself was the fourth most used word. These feelings were then reflected in the co-occurrence networks when the subjects shared their feelings on the negative aspects of social media usage and their belief that they are overusing social media. Because there was an emphasis made on the negative experiences associated with social media, a recommendation can be made that college students should take the time to regulate their usage on social media to lower the amount of usage while also better regulating the content they consume every day.