

# Researchers disclose the effect of social media use on the mental health of college students during the pandemic

July 1 2024

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The COVID-19 pandemic had an [unprecedented effect](#) on college students' mental health. Symptoms like anxiety and major depression in

young adults ages 18-25 increased significantly compared to before the pandemic.

A new study from researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill looks at a possible contributing factor to the worsening trends in mental health: social media. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Health Economics*.

We know that college students and adolescents are using social media more. Last May, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory on social media and youth mental health, noting that there are "ample indicators" that social media can "pose a risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents."

But questions remained: Are more depressed people using social media more? Or is social media contributing to more depression?

To answer this, a team led by economist Jane Cooley Fruehwirth used unique longitudinal survey data from first-year college students at a large public research university. The data was collected both before and during the [pandemic](#). This information allowed the researchers to compare social media usage before and during the pandemic along with other factors like [social isolation](#), anxiety and depression symptoms, and how much students were sleeping, exercising, and interacting with their friends.

What they found was surprising: Increased social media usage at the beginning of the pandemic didn't have a large effect on college students' mental health, but increased social media usage 18 months into the pandemic—when colleges had largely reopened and students were back on campus—did have a negative effect on students' mental health. Students who increased their social media usage by an hour 18 months into the pandemic were much more likely to be depressed and anxious.

Why is this the case?

Fruehwirth and team found some evidence that [social media use](#) took away from time for other activities that are good for [mental health](#)--such as exercise--when students were back in dorms, and that social media also seemed to increase stress from peers. Both early and later in the pandemic, the effects of social media usage were worst among socially isolated college students.

"These students who were socially isolated were not using social media to stay connected," says Fruehwirth. "They were using it in a different way."

Fruehwirth notes that resilience and [social support](#) helps protect students from the negative consequences of social media.

"This is not a 'social media is bad' story," she says. "It's that some students are using it in a way that isn't detrimental and some are, and we wanted to tease out those differences."

The findings suggest that college campuses themselves can play a role in reducing isolation. Approximately 1 in 5 college students currently feels isolated on a college campus. This suggests that there's more at play than just social media.

"Universities can think about how to build more connections through physical and social spaces, through connections through clubs," says Fruehwirth. "They can create peer support networks and help build resilience."

Co-authors include Alex Xingbang Weng and Krista Perreira.

**More information:** Jane Cooley Fruehwirth et al, The effect of social

media use on mental health of college students during the pandemic, *Health Economics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/hec.4871](https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.4871)

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Citation: Researchers disclose the effect of social media use on the mental health of college students during the pandemic (2024, July 1) retrieved 2 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-07-disclose-effect-social-media-mental.html>

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