Type of social media use is related to depressive symptoms in a national sample of U.S. older adults

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Older adults are at risk for depression, isolation, and loneliness. Technology use has been put forth as one way to help decrease these health risks for older adults. While studies have found that Internet use is associated with lower depression and loneliness, fewer studies have examined whether and how social media use (SMU) may be associated with mental health outcomes in older adults. One study with older adults found that greater passive SMU (e.g., scrolling and less social interactions) is linked with reduced loneliness. However, the majority of research, which typically focuses on young individuals and depression, has revealed that active SMU (e.g., posting and social interactions) is related to decreased depressive symptoms, and passive SMU is related to increased depressive symptoms. To determine the relationship between SMU and depression in older adults, we assessed these constructs in a national sample of individuals aged 65 years and older (N=862). We conducted logistic regressions to reveal that active SMU was significantly associated with increased odds for high depressive symptoms (AOR=1.77, 95%CI=1.41-2.21, p<.001), whereas passive SMU was significantly associated with decreased odds for high depressive symptoms (AOR=1.31, 95%CI =1.11-1.55, p=.01). Our results suggest that the relationships between active and passive SMU and depressive symptoms in older adults are opposite from the previous literature focusing on younger adults. We speculate that these findings may be due to older adults’ engaging in fewer social comparisons overall, hence experiencing fewer negative feelings while passively viewing others’ social media.