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Impact of Negative Social Media Experiences on Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidality Among College Students: Exploring Racial/Ethnic Differences

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Background: Negative experiences on social media can lead to decreased self-esteem and emotional maladjustment as a result of upward social comparison, especially among young adults. Current research focuses on White individuals, despite reports that racial/ethnic minorities face increased discrimination online. Thus, we examined the association between general positive (PESM) and negative experiences on social media (NESM) and anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, in a diverse college sample.

Method: A racially and ethnically diverse sample of 915 college students (44.5% White; 16.1% Black; 22.2% Latinx; 9.5% Asian; 78.1% female) completed an online survey assessing indirect PESM and NESM, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Participants rated how frequently social media made them feel worse about themselves, pressure to post enjoyable content, overwhelmed, creative, supported, and connected to friends.

Results: Almost a third of students reported experiencing NESM at least sometimes. Linear regression models examined NESM, PESM, and race/ethnicity as predictors of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, and sex and time spent on social media as covariates. The models for NESM and depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation accounted for 16%, 29%, and 1% of the variance, respectively. Black students reported higher depression than White students.

Race/ethnicity did not moderate the association between NESM and mental health outcomes. Positive social media experiences did not reflect any significant findings.

Conclusions: Indirect NESM consistently predicted depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation across racial/ethnic groups. Future research should examine protective factors against negative social media experiences to inform intervention efforts promoting adaptive social media.