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Perceptions of Clinically Depressed Individuals: Social Media Use, Depressive Symptoms, and Interpersonal Relationships

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Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Rachel Fullen

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Perceptions of Clinically Depressed Individuals: Social Media Use, Depressive

Symptoms, and Interpersonal Relationships

by

Rachel Fullen

BS, Walden University, 2020

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

February 2025

Abstract

Recent literature has shown an association between social media usage and depressive symptoms, but there remains a gap regarding the perceptions of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. This qualitative study was conducted to uncover how people view social media and their clinical depression as well as the quality of their interpersonal interactions through social media platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 individuals who were diagnosed with clinical depression, used social media for 2 hours daily, and lived with their significant other/partner. The theory applied to this study was Blumler and Katz's uses and gratification theory. The phenomenological approach was used to delve into the subjective experiences of clinically depressed individuals. The themes that emerged from the data included were (a) emotions of social media use, (b) navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media, (c) the increase of suicidal ideation, (d) increase of depressed mood, and (e) the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships. Findings showed that while social media could be helpful in relationships it also impacted depression symptoms. Another discovery was that social media helps with depression and strengthens relationships with significant others/partners. Based on these results, policymakers could encourage social media platforms to implement features that promote mental well-being, such as content filters or mental health resources, promoting positive social change.

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Dedication

As I embark on this journey, I feel compelled to dedicate it to my beloved family, especially my two children, Mark and O'mari. This journey has been long and arduous, but I want my children to know that no matter how tough it gets, they should always persevere and push through what they started. I hope my example can teach them valuable lessons about the importance of focus and determination in accomplishing their dreams. May they always remember that anything is possible if they set their minds to it. I am grateful to my beloved husband, who has tirelessly worked daily to provide for our family and support my aspirations. Your unwavering dedication and hard work are truly inspiring, and you have encouraged me to become a diligent and passionate individual. I cannot express enough how much I appreciate your constant presence and support.

I want to take a moment to remember my mother, who unfortunately passed away. This achievement is dedicated to my mother, watching over me and beaming with pride. My mother was my constant support, rock, and source of strength. She would be proud to see the person I have become if she were still alive.

I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to my husband and children for their unwavering love and support. Reflecting on my journey, I cannot help but express my deepest appreciation to my brother, Antonio. He has been my constant source of motivation and a pillar of strength, always pushing me to be my best. His words of encouragement have been a guiding light that has brought me to where I am today.

I would also like to give a special shoutout to my aunt, Shelle, whose unwavering support has been amazing. She has been my confidante, sounding board, and rock

throughout my journey's ups and downs. Her listening ear and willingness to give me breaks whenever I needed them have been invaluable. Last, I cannot forget to thank my best friend, Kuwana. She has been my constant companion, always there to cheer me on and lift my spirits whenever I felt down. Her unwavering loyalty and support have been a strength that has carried me through some of my toughest moments. I am immensely grateful to my mother, husband, children, brother, aunt, and best friend. You have been my unwavering pillar of strength, a constant source of inspiration, and the reason I keep pushing forward. I wholeheartedly dedicate my success to all of you, and I always promise to cherish the love and support you have shown me.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, who passed away on August 26, 2024. His inspiration motivated me throughout my journey, and I know he would be proud of the strength I demonstrated in completing my dissertation.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Lisa Scharff, who accepted to become my committee member. Dr. Scharff's expertise in my field of study and her willingness to provide constructive feedback has been instrumental in shaping my research. Her insights and suggestions have helped me refine my research questions and identify the most relevant literature. I am confident that my dissertation will be of the highest quality with both of your guidance. I am truly grateful for the time and effort that Dr. Arcuri and Dr. Scharff have put into ensuring the success of my research. Their support has been invaluable to me, and I cannot thank them enough for their contributions. I will always be indebted to them for their unwavering support and guidance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Contemporary society has seen significant changes in communication and interaction paradigms because of the transformative rise of social media networks. Social media has become indispensable in people's daily lives (Hou et al., 2019). Social media serves as a conduit for social interaction, mostly used to amplify emotional connections virtually. However, as internet accessibility continues to broaden, social media platforms both alleviate and exacerbate stress and tension among adolescents and adults (Simone et al., 2019). Though social media platforms foster emotional support and improve individuals' sense of belonging (Simone et al., 2019), they can lead to heightened loneliness and anxiety (Boursier et al., 2023). Social media use is also linked to mental health issues such as clinical depression, addiction, and cyberbullying (Boursier et al., 2023).

I examined the multifaceted interplay between the use of social media, depression symptoms, and interpersonal relationships among people experiencing clinical depression. The impact of social media is contradictory in that it fosters valuable social connectivity while at the same time posing potential risks to one's mental well-being (Boursier et al., 2023; Simone et al., 2019). For example, individuals who actively engaged with COVID-19 social media posts were likelier to feel anxious, while those who used social media to connect with others during the pandemic were more likely to feel stressed and depressed (First et al., 2021; Vaterlaus et al., 2021). There is not enough literature on how clinically depressed individuals perceive changes in their interpersonal relationships and how the use of social media relates to their depressive symptoms (First

et al., 2021). As such, this research aimed to critically examine how individuals with clinical depression perceive their social media use and interpersonal relationships.

The significance of this study is anchored on the increasing social media prevalence coupled with its impact on mental health and the limited awareness of the interplay between the networks and clinically depressed individuals. Exploring this intersection contributes insight on developing effective strategies and interventions to address these issues. The study results may be used to inform policy development and provide guidelines to create healthy practices for social media use. I provides empirical evidence for social media users who rely on social media and may have mental health issues. The study might help social media users who are battling mental health problems learn how to function with depression and potential interpersonal relationship issues while using social media.

Chapter 1 introduces the investigation through an outline of contemporary social media usage and its impact on mental health. The following sections focus on the study's background to highlight the urgency and relevance of addressing the topic. The problem statement articulates the potential gap in the extant literature this study sought to fill. The purpose of the study was to detail the objectives of the research and the projected social implications that could be derived from the findings. The theoretical framework is reviewed to highlight the conceptual foundations guiding this research. The nature of the study, as well as the methodology, are also reviewed. The chapter outlines the organization of the rest of the dissertation, setting the structure of other chapters.

Background

Given the rise of social media networks and subsequent shift in contemporary relationships, societal lifestyles and interactions have significantly transformed. Social media is pivotal in people's daily lives, as it acts as a medium for social interactions, enhancing emotional bonds virtually (Hou et al., 2019). However, though some suggest it gives a space for self-expression and connection with other individuals, others assert that it can harm their mental health and social development (Keles et al., 2020). For instance, while social media platforms like Facebook can be used for networking and communication, their overuse can harm individuals and society (Marino et al., 2018). This dual-faceted nature of social media, where it can alleviate and exacerbate stress, loneliness, and tension, is particularly pronounced among adolescents and adults, indicating a complex relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes (Simone et al., 2019). While these platforms offer the potential for empathy, belonging, and emotional support (Simone et al., 2019), they are also implicated in adverse outcomes such as increased anxiety, loneliness, and the exacerbation of mental health issues like clinical depression due to cyberbullying and addiction (Boursier et al., 2023).

Even though social media comes with some benefits, risks can emerge, and it is essential to limit screen time, encourage positive online interactions, and promote offline activities. There is a significant correlation between depression and social media with related activities (Keles et al., 2020). For instance, insomnia and other sleep-related factors are commonly linked with social media usage (Keles et al., 2020). Further,

specific attitudes and behaviors, rather than the frequency of social media usage, may have a greater influence on symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Keles et al., 2020). These include social comparison, active or passive use of social media, and motives for social media use. This influence is more significant than the number of hours of social media use or the number of online friends. For example, researchers have found that many young adults suffer from excessive Facebook use, which causes problems in their personal and interpersonal relationships (Marino et al., 2018). Regularly accessing Facebook has also been connected to the possibility of higher degrees of psychological stress as well as lower levels of psychological well-being, leading to the development of conditions like depression and loneliness (Marino et al., 2018). The absence of social support or connections can impede an individual's mental well-being by depriving them of the resources and opportunities their supporters offer (First et al., 2021). Real-life support is diminished as digital interactions are prolonged, highlighting a shift where social needs are increasingly being met online, potentially at the sacrifice of limiting or no in-person social interaction (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021).

This study closed the contemporary knowledge gap by examining the intricacies of social media use, interpersonal relationships, and depressive symptoms. While researchers have investigated the relationship between social media use and depression, few have explored this relationship in the context of interpersonal relationships from the viewpoint of an individual experiencing depressive symptoms (Hamilton & Finley, 2020). The research intended to explore the interaction of these elements with an emphasis on clinical depression within the expanding digital social context. The

importance of this research involves understanding the social ramifications of social media use on mental health. The increasing overreliance on digital networks to harness social support underscores the rising problem of social isolation and depression (Fu et al., 2022). This research contributes to the body of literature, generating insights into the multifaceted impact of social media to foster emotional support and drive mental health challenges. The study aimed to improve the knowledge that could assist in developing valuable policies and interventions for mitigating the negative issues associated with social media use (Marino et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

While social media has become an integral aspect of people's daily lives, it has led to considerable concerns about individuals' perceptions of interpersonal relationships and mental well-being, especially among those who suffer from clinical depression. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2022), there was a 17% increase in internet use globally during the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues linked to the social media landscape during this time of isolation were exacerbated by the need for social distancing and quarantine measures, which further increased people's dependence on social media to maintain professional and personal connections. Outside of the pandemic, social media use has been associated with lower emotional support, social isolation, and anxiety in young adults (Shensa et al., 2020). Research has noted that 20% of U.S. young adults prefer communicating via social media compared to in-person or on the phone, and 24% report missing important moments in their lives because they were trying to capture and share them via social media (Shensa et al., 2020).

The interplay between clinically depressed individuals and social media use, especially on their mental health, was explored in this study. The literature gap is significant due to the rising pervasiveness of depression across the globe as well as the universal social media nature. Over 5.7% of adults over 60 years old suffer from depression throughout the world (Wang et al., 2023). The problem in this study involved understanding the role of social media usage on clinical depression. While there is some evidence suggesting a link between social media use and mental health issues, it is not known whether social media use is a contributing factor to clinical depression or merely a tool that exacerbates existing depressive symptoms. Existing studies have highlighted this ambiguity, suggesting a complex, bidirectional relationship that warrants further investigation (Lee et al., 2020). For example, social media could positively mitigate depression and facilitate adjustment (Elias & Gorey, 2022), as it can be used to positively promote social support, boost relationships, and improve friendships (Wang et al., 2023; Waterlaus et al., 2021). The focus was exploring participants' lived experiences and providing insights for recommendations and targeted interventions to foster healthier social media usage. Countering and building on extant findings, this study highlights the complex role of social media in clinically depressed individuals, providing valuable insights into the psychology field and society. This study bridges the gap in existing knowledge and amplifies an understanding of the perceptions of social media and mental health. The objective was to improve the health and well-being of people with clinical depression.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological research was conducted to explore the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals while also focusing on their perceptions of the interplay between social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships. This inquiry was necessitated by the growing body of evidence suggesting both the potential benefits and harms of social media on mental health, including improving mental disorders like anxiety, stress, and dependency development (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). I sought to uncover how social media impacts depressed individuals' mental health and social interactions while providing insights into the potential benefits and harm for this population. The goal was also to delve deeper into how people view social media and their clinical depression and the quality of their interpersonal interactions through social media platforms. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA),), the research was designed to explore the variety and depth of individual experiences relative to social media use among clinically depressed individuals. The study focused on their emotional symptoms resulting from interactions through social media.

Through interviews and surveys, this study aimed to show the multifaceted undercurrents between the chronic use of social media platforms and depressive symptoms and the quality of relational associations among Individuals with clinical depression. The primary goal was to unearth and suggest effective interventions and strategies to assist depressed people in the face of digital technologies. Conducting interviews is a way to build a well-detailed picture of the diversity of the links between

individuals' depression symptoms, social media habits, and the quality of their interpersonal relations. This research contributes to the mental health field by offering a detailed account of the complexities of implementing therapeutic interventions and support for those who are clinically depressed. The goal was to develop efficient strategies and interventions that can be used by those who suffer from depression who are on social media platforms. Given the significant role of social media in connecting individuals, including those with socially stigmatized conditions, this study acknowledged the potential of digital platforms to reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Conversely, damage can also be done by creating the conditions for self-stigma and isolation through online interactions (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). This study sought to critically explore these notions to develop an awareness of the impact of social media on mental health from the lens of clinically depressed individuals.

Research Question

How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experience?

Theoretical Framework

The uses and gratification (U & G) theory (Blumler et al., 1974) served as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory posits that individuals actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs, such as personal identity reinforcement, entertainment, social interaction, and information seeking (Blumler et al., 1974). The theoretical model emphasizes the proactive role of one's drive to satisfy one's social and psychological

needs. By applying this model, I explored how clinically depressed individuals use social media to meet their emotional and social needs and how these interactions influence their depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationships.

The uses and gratification (U & G) theory offered a broad framework to understand why and how clinically depressed individuals derive motivation to use social media networks. Through this theory, I sought to reveal the complexity of social media utilization patterns, the gratification of social and emotional needs, and its overall impact on social well-being and mental health. Exploring these dynamics was vital in formulating an understanding of the social medial role in the lives of clinically depressed. This research integrated social capital and social support concepts from the uses and gratification (U & G) theory to explore the role of virtual communities in providing sources of interaction and support for depressed people through social media networks. This aspect helped identify possible negative and positive effects of social media utilization relative to the person's social relationships and mental health. As such, it was possible to derive insights into how social media could be a tool for deteriorating or improving people's mental health and well-being.

Additionally, there are several ways the framework was used to design this study. I applied and aligned the concept of this theory to develop interview questions to help explore this research topic. Another way the theory was applied was to structure and organize the data analysis. The uses and gratification (U & G) theory is used to examine the impact of media on individuals by exploring how people use it to fulfill their needs and experience satisfaction (Blumler, 1979). This theory emphasizes the role of

individuals in shaping their media consumption rather than solely attributing it to the influence of media. Through gratifications research, various motivations could help to identify what drives people to consume media, including a force of habit, companionship, relaxation, and interpersonal relationships.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative phenomenological research design, using Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), to delve into the subjective experiences of clinically depressed individuals. The primary research phenomenon encompasses the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals relative to their social media engagements and how such interactions affect their interpersonal relationships or depressive symptoms. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is particularly suited to this research as it helps to focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their social and personal world. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, detailed narratives that reflect the participants' experiences with social media and its impact on their mental health and interpersonal relationships (see Merleau Ponty, 1945). The aim was to delve deeper into the perceptions of clinically depressed individuals as far as their social media use and its impact on their interpersonal relationships are concerned. Selecting Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is informed by its emphasis on people's subjective experiences and the essence they assign to their social media interactions, especially in the context of depressed individuals. Embodied in Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's existentialism and embodiment concepts, I investigated how people view and navigate real-world and virtual interactions in the face of mental health issues

(Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The data analysis included coding transcripts to identify common trends or patterns and themes, elucidating from the participants' narratives on social media use in the context of interpersonal relationships and depression.

Definitions

Clinical depression (major depressive disorder): This term describes a severe mood disorder, which culminates into pervasive feelings of lack of desire towards activities, hopelessness, and sadness, thus affecting one's daily functioning (Turk et al., 2021). Individuals' mental health, behavior, and sickness history are used in the diagnosis of clinical depression.

Interpersonal relationships: This concept involves the complex and dynamic connection between people, characterized by physical, social, and emotional interactions (Fu et al., 2022). An individual's values, cultural norms, and experiences can help to promote and support such relationships.

Social media: These are digital platforms used to create and share virtual content or engage in social networking (Baines et al., 2022). The networks facilitate the formation of online communities, allowing people to interact and exchange personal messages, ideas, or information.

Uses and gratification (U & G) theory: This theoretical model shows how Individuals actively use media to fulfill different intellectual or emotional needs (Blumler et al., 1974). This model stipulates that using media proactively is driven by the desire to attain a certain gratification.

Assumptions

Various assumptions are evident in this qualitative phenomenological study on the influence of social media utilization on a person's interpersonal relationships and clinical depression. The assumptions are necessary in interpreting and comprehending the findings of this study since they ground the research into a realistic setting. Clarifying the following assumptions is imperative as they are anchored on extant and current theoretical frameworks and literature.

First, it was assumed that all participants in this study were deceptive with their interview responses and answered all questions honestly and to the best of their ability. This assumption is critical for the integrity and depth of the qualitative data collected, as the research seeks to understand deeply personal and subjective experiences related to social media use and depression. Another assumption was that having clinical depression influences perceptions of reality and the ability to engage in the responsibilities involved in maintaining a long-term relationship. This assumption was necessary for exploring how social media might serve as a compensatory mechanism for such perceived disconnection or how it might exacerbate these feelings (Fu et al., 2022). I also assumed that participants provided honest and reflective responses during the interviews. It is also assumed that the patterns of social media interaction among participants remain relatively stable. The essential part of this assumption was to consistently interpret the questions and collect data according to the experiences shared by the study participants.

The captured assumptions were important in conceptualizing and executing this study. They offered the basis for which the study research questions could be explored.

The presuppositions recognized the inherent limitations that could interfere with the effective discussion of the complex dynamics of using social media platforms among people with clinical depression. Still, framing the examination into a logical and coherent structure was imperative.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative phenomenological study narrowed down how clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experiences. The study topic was specifically informed by the increasingly pervasive use of social media and its possible implications on people's mental health. This subject has attracted significant traction in contemporary studies in psychology. Investigating the lived experiences of individuals with clinical depression helps to uncover an understanding of the compound interplay between social connectivity, depression, and social media usage.

One of the defining characteristics of this type of analysis was that the results obtained are highly contextualized and relate directly to the subjects' personal experiences. Despite the specificity of the study that provided insights into direct life experiences of clinically depressed network use, generalizations of the findings to other populations or contexts were limited. Narratives can shed new light on mental health, technology use, social connection, and the issues relevant to researchers, clinicians, and policymakers. Transparency will help researchers to determine the contextual applicability of these results. It could prompt additional studies to extend the spectrum of the findings across different demographic areas and diagnostic groups.

Limitations

It was important to detail the possible limitations in this study, especially on methodological and design shortcomings, potential biases that could affect the study findings, and possible measures to address the limitations.

Scope of the Study

This research was limited to investigating the perceptions of the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals, particularly their social media use, their depression, and interpersonal relationships. In line with this focus, the possible study findings might not be representative of the broader population of people with other kinds of mental health problems. Focusing specifically on this population affects the generalizability of the study outcomes. I ensured the recruitment of diverse participants, including social media usage, gender, depression severity, and age. The reason for the diversity was to capture wide perspectives and experiences to improve the dependability of the study findings.

Data Collection Method

Zoom video conferencing, a cloud-based platform, was used to collect the primary data in this study. Although Zoom provides access to individuals from different geographical areas, it might be confined to capturing body language and nonverbal cues, which are important in qualitative studies. Lack of such nonverbal communication could restrict the depth of exploring the participants' experiences. I used triangulation to obtain rich data. This involved using the participants' diary entries, social media logs, and semi-structured interviews.

Biases

Research bias could limit this study, as I brought forth my experiences or perspectives, which could have affected data collection and interpretation. I used bracketing to consciously recognize and set aside personal perspectives for objective data collection and analysis to address this bias. This aspect involved keeping a reflective journal during the research process to indicate and reflect on any biases or preconceptions that might arise.

This study's findings might also be affected by participant bias. The study respondents might use responses that reflect their perceptions of what the research wants to hear rather than the true depiction of their experiences. This challenge might arise when exploring sensitive issues such as social media habits and mental health. I built an effective rapport with the selected study participants to address this limitation. I empathized with the significance of open and honest communication while at the same time assuring the participants of their confidentiality. I also used open-ended questions to probe the participants further for more information or clarifications.

Measures to Address Limitations

To overcome the limitations of virtual interviews, I used specific, open-ended questions and probes to extract the most detailed responses. I also used audio and visual recording equipment, consented by participants, to grasp the emotions and expressions evoked during the interviews. Bringing in different data types, including social media usage logs, site data, and interviews with participants in various stages, helped to dig deeper into people's experiences. Such methodological triangulation defines the research

that will entail more data and give a better understanding of the studied phenomenon. The scope of the study involves people with clinical depression; however, it was crucial to recruit participants with diverse profiles from this group, considering their age, the social media platforms they engage with, and the severity of their depression. This breadth of experience integrates, enlarges, and strengthens the reliability of the study.

Significance

This qualitative phenomenological study contributes to the extant literature on the multifaceted interplay between social media usage, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. Focusing on this investigation, this research highlighted the different ways social media could be a double-edged sword, elucidating its positive and negative ramifications, including providing support and increasing depressive symptoms among users. These findings helped to broaden the existing academic discourse and provide an elaborate guide for future research in behavioral and psychological sciences (Liu et al., 2020).

The study findings may also inform policy and practices in different areas. Mental health practitioners could use ideas from this study to improve therapeutic interventions by considering the social media habits of their patients during treatment. Through this understanding, customized strategies could be designed to address potential shortcomings of social media usage among clinically depressed individuals. The findings could also influence policymaking, particularly in developing safe and beneficial social media use guidelines in mental health care and support services. Organizations and educational institutions dealing with clinically depressed Individuals could leverage the study

findings to develop preventive measures, including digital literacy programs to promote healthier social media habits. This aspect would reduce the likelihood of developing the adverse effects of online behaviors.

Implications in this research go beyond clinical practice and academia and can potentially improve positive and behavioral change among social media users. While demonstrating how social media impacts people's social lives and mental well-being, this study contributes to understanding people's broader challenges in the digital age. Subsequently, increased awareness will stimulate discourse on technology use and its influence on mental health and support. The study outcomes will help provide knowledge to empower families and individuals to mindfully navigate social media mindfully, prioritizing seeking supportive environments and individual connections to address feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Summary

Chapter 1 provides the foundation of this study on the complex interplay between social media usage, interpersonal relationships, and mental health among clinically depressed individuals. It covers a background introduction and the research problem, showing how social media habits could impact people with clinical depression. This study was anchored on the uses and gratification (U & G) theory to investigate the motives driving persistent reliance on social media platforms among Individuals with clinical depression. The significance of the study extends beyond academic enrichment to practical implications, intending to influence clinical practices and policymaking and promote healthier social media habits among those with depression. Chapter 2 includes a

comprehensive literature review that critically examines existing research, identifies gaps this study seeks to address, and situates the research within the wider academic dialogue on social media's effects on mental health and interpersonal dynamics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The qualitative phenomenological research was conducted to examine the perceptions of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. Social media is praised for its ability to unite individuals with commonalities, including those physically or geographically marginalized, offering a platform for shared understanding and support (Yin, 2022). But people who interact with others across a variety of contexts (including face to face as well as online) have scored lower on depression and higher in life satisfaction than those who interacted with others mainly online (Simone et al., 2019). The dichotomy of opinions viewing social media as either a supportive tool or a catalyst for negative mental health outcomes necessitates a deeper dive into the lived experiences of depressed individuals to grasp this relationship fully.

Although there has been some progress in research on social media use of individuals with clinical depression and their depressive symptoms and social connections, there is a significant gap in understanding this relationship. Prior studies have pointed out a relationship between social media usage and depression symptoms but have not explained this from the perspective of those experiencing depression (Lee et al., 2020). It is important to examine how individuals perceive the relationship between their own social media use, interpersonal relationships, and mental health, particularly in individuals with depression. The findings have far-reaching implications for various individuals and groups (Simone et al., 2019).

This chapter includes an existing literature base to help give the research problem a wider academic examination, explaining how individuals with clinical depression perceive their use and interpersonal relationships. This section summarizes published data, highlights the inconsistencies in the current understanding, and prioritizes the necessity of the study.

Literature Search Strategy

While preparing for this research, a strategy to search for literature was designed to collect and review scholarly articles, dissertations, and conference proceedings that survey the intersections of social media use, clinical depression, and interpersonal relationships. The search was designed to gather empirical evidence and theoretical discussions pertinent to the study's focus, emphasizing contemporary research conducted within the last 5 years to ensure the derived information is current and relevant.

Databases accessed included Walden University's library database, ProQuest, and Sage Journals. Google Scholar was also used as an auxiliary search engine. The time frame for the literature spanned from 1979 to 2023, underscoring the latest findings to understand the current landscape of research in these areas. Key search terms were selected to target the major concepts and ensure the retrieval of relevant literature. The primary search terms include *interpersonal bonding*, *social media*, *social media and depression*, *depression*, and *social media use*. These terms were used individually and in various combinations to optimize the search results. Similar terms such as *digital communication*, *mental health and social networks*, *online interactions*, and *emotional well-being* were employed to extend the search parameters.

The search procedure was iterative, covering numerous queries with multiple combinations of keywords and phrases along the identified databases. First, searches were vast, using general terms like *social media* and *depression* to pinpoint a baseline understanding of the topic. Subsequent research was more refined, focusing on the interplay between social media and depression and its impact on interpersonal relationships. This method resulted in identifying broad trends specific to the current body of research. Where current research was sparse, and few dissertations or conference proceedings were identified, the reference lists of retrieved articles were used to find additional sources that might not have appeared in initial searches. The literature search yielded relevant content, providing a broad topic review of the study focus areas. The strategy outlines the basis for this study, highlighting a detailed review of current academic discussions on interpersonal relationships, clinical depression, and social media usage. The strategic approach to this literature was integral in identifying the gaps in knowledge, demonstrating the importance and need for this study.

Theoretical Foundation

The uses and gratification (U & G) theory is founded on a pioneering media theory that depicts how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy several personal contingencies. Emanating from the work of Blumler and Katz in the 1970s, the uses and gratification (U & G) theory suggests that entertainment, information seeking, personal identification, and social interactions are major psychological needs driving media consumption (Blumler et al., 1974). This perspective interrogates the notion of passive media consumption, underscoring the initiative-taking place of the audience in media

relations. The major proposition of the theory is that individuals use media for personal gratification. This consumption is brought up by individual uniqueness, social context, and media characteristics. The audience's active role in choosing and understanding media content is important in conceptualizing the dynamic relationship between the parties. The uses and gratification (U & G) theory has been extensively used across different media forms, from radio to traditional television and the digital landscapes of online gaming and social media. Extensive exploration of escapism, social connection, and information seeking has shown the theory's adaptability and suitability to the changing media environments (Liu et al., 2020).

The uses and gratification (U & G) play a vital role in media studies, particularly in ascertaining why and how people use media from their perspective. As Liu et al. (2020) posited, media gratification is when an individual gets satisfaction from media use. The uses and gratification (U & G) model claim such behaviors relate to why people use media, what influences engagement, and the outcomes of media usage. This theory has a wide application as it provides insights into why media users use media (in the context of mass media). The theory argues that users will be more likely to sustain the use of social networking platforms if they meet their needs and find gratification in these sites (Liu et al., 2020).

The selection of this theory for this research stems from its suitability and adaptability in understanding social media use, clinical depression, and interpersonal relationships. Using this theory makes it possible to understand how individuals with clinical depression engage with social media to satisfy specific psychological needs. This

study aims to extend the application of the uses and gratification (U & G) theory by examining how clinically depressed individuals perceive and use social media in the context of their interpersonal relationships. I sought to understand how social media serves as a platform for gratification-seeking in ways that may either alleviate or exacerbate symptoms of depression and the quality of interpersonal relationships. By focusing on the unique experiences of this population, the research questions challenge existing applications of the theory and seek to build upon it by adding an understanding of the role of social media in the lives of those with clinical depression. The uses and gratification (U & G) theory provides a theoretical lens through which to examine the motivations behind social media use among individuals with clinical depression. This study may contribute to the theoretical and empirical knowledge of social media's impact on mental health and gratification theory to cover the complexities of depression in this modern digital era.

Alternative Theories

Gratification Theory

The gratification theory of media is an advancement of earlier ideas on how feelings seeking could be a product of media intake (Blumler, 1979). The gratification theory presupposes that depressed people may also suffer from their social media dependence in terms of coping mechanisms (Liu et al., 2020). This means that people are on social media platforms more than before due to personal needs like the desire for emotional support and fulfilling needs. According to the gratification approach, the

visually attractive elements of social media and the ability to design a fashionable and desirable persona pull users together (Liu et al., 2020).

Selective Exposure Theory, Media Consumption Theory, Monetary Reward Theory, Hedonistic Experience Theory

The selective exposure theory, theorized by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz in the 1970s, argues that individuals can selectively consume and use media that suits their immediate needs and preferences (Blumler et al., 1974). Similarly, the media consumption theory states that meeting the users' desires can contribute to satisfactory results like increased happiness. The spread of wrong or harmful content can also bring undesirable consequences. By understanding why people choose some content and not others as sources of gratification for their psychological requirements (Blumler, 1979), researchers can understand the dynamics of people's media experiences. This philosophy is adopted in many media psychology fields to understand and interpret different modes of media capture, including TV watching, social network usage, and video games. Scientists have learned that people use the media for several reasons. One of them is to have fun. The others are the purposes through which these media could provide escape, companionship, information, or entertainment (Blumler, 1979).

Using the monetary reward theory as a basis, media can be explored as to how it can be a benefit in decreasing the adherence of clinic depression individuals. In that regard, the primary needs are mostly connected to the cognitive aspect, where an individual acquires knowledge, understands the society around an individual, and invests in curiosity and the desire to explore (Blumler, 1979). Further, the hedonic experience

theory is still helpful today in understanding the specific needs of consumers. By customizing the content to suit those purposes, media producers can bring out more fascinating and relevant media offerings that attract a broader audience, eventually or otherwise. User engagement and technological satisfaction levels determine a person's dependence on technology.

Social Needs

Social needs often range from the gratification of emotional needs to the satisfaction of hedonic needs by using various media within society, such as the emotional and pleasurable experience of watching a football game. Viewers of a football match might experience appreciation or joy; however, they can also be saddened when the opposing team wins a goal. Feelings of personal cause may make them react more strongly to scorn or nasty comments about the discussed process (Blumler, 1979).

Personal identity and interactive needs crucially determine the individual psychological state because their significance lies within people's feelings. This is the prerequisite, and, therefore, it requires self-confidence, firmness of mind, self-respect, self-worth, integrity, and rising above social status, to mention but a few (Blumler, 1979). This means that they use various kinds of media platforms to seek the authentication of their postings and boost their status to their peers.

Social influencers build an intimate connection with their audience and can impact marketing broadly (Ki et al., 2020). People tend to connect with people with whom they realize things in their lives, which contributes to forming those relationships (Ki et al., 2020). Since it involves identifying with a brand, consumer brand loyalty is one

of the reasons brands can get recognition and notoriety. The strength of the emotional bond that a person develops with a particular person can make a relationship more durable, meaningful, and intense, such as the status of the emotional bond of that person with another partner (Ki et al., 2020). Personal development and emotional connection develop when interacting with a person.

Regarding the organizational behavior perspective, it would be fruitful to investigate the connection between the organization and the employees due to fulfilling employees' need for competence (Ki et al., 2020). People cannot bond with people who are against increasing the competence of self. SMIs can help to encourage the audience to buy the information endorsements for the product/brand. This is done by creating an emotional relationship based on the users' needs with the followers (Ki et al., 2020).

Social media platforms create functions that fulfill several social needs, such as communication, information, and entertainment (Houghton et al., 2020), SNS stands for social network service, and its functionality is remarkable as it is an easy and comfortable way of staying in touch with your relatives, friends, and alike; it is the chief cause of the ubiquity of social networking sites (SNSs), which, mainly for this reason, are considered effective in meeting the needs of people today. With the audience biased towards easily consumable content, social media sites such as Instagram have shaken the foundations of our conception of reality. In the past, people exclusively stuck to direct conversations, television, radio, podcasts, and movies for self-gratification (Houghton et al., 2020). Many individuals increase their reliance on these websites to fulfill their psychological and emotional requirements because of the profusion of social media users. Websites are

places where people are motivated more by their instinctive need to connect with others to keep themselves alive in today's digital world.

Since Facebook caters to different individuals' needs that apply to texting or phone calls, people, on average, tend to use Facebook more frequently than they did if the Facebook platform had not operated on the contrary. Personal identity and the need for interactive communication could be the most potent elements in establishing an intense sense of belonging and community (Blumler, 1979). People can meet and interact with individuals with related topics and beliefs while exploring these platforms, where they can build their social networks. This network stands for extensive social and professional linkages that provide ample close-knit and stimulating opportunities.

The uses and gratification (U & G) theory, one of the most popular mass communication theories, dates back to the 1970s and supports the idea people actively and consciously choose the media they consume. Such a theory changes direction from the media to the individual and emphasizes what a person does with the media rather than what the media does to an individual. The purpose of the uses and gratification (U & G) theory is to deliver a broad and deep examination of the individuals' essence of what and why media use people enjoy obtaining specific pleasure by using media (Blumler, 1979). What communicators do is that specific fundamental thoughts that make effective communication possible. These assumptions emphasize the purpose-driven and modeled behavior of communication behavior as well as the ability of the individuals to channel their selected medium to meet their needs. People could also categorize their mode of communication based on their wants and needs.

The media compete to provide effective communication platforms and are influenced by social and psychological factors, for example, without forgetting to be based on individuals' stands or opinions. The uses and gratification (U & G) theory is a practical resource that helps us understand what motivates people to use the media to satisfy their purposes and provides new insight into communication behavior.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Social Media

Social media has played a significant role in people's daily lives, such as chatting on Instagram and Facebook for hours (Dorrance et al., 2020). Social media is a platform used to entertain and inform individuals, but it may degrade the mental health of the users. According to Dorrance Hall et al. (2020), social networking leads to mental health issues and compromises the life expectancy of the elderly. Baby boomers, who are older adults, have contributed to the increasing rate of depression being a challenge. The effect of memory and other cognitive impairments in older adults with depression progresses to dementia in older age. There was an interaction between each area of social media emotional support and depression risk among U.S. youth to explore whether social media emotional support differs from FTF emotional support (Shensa et al., 2020). The cross-sectional study demonstrated the existence of two independent constructs that could not be viewed as a mixture of the two: emotional support received through social media (SM-ES) and face-to-face social interaction (FTF-ES). This finding found that emotional support from SMB is not equivalent to the emotional support received from FTF. The authors found that SM communication fundamentally differs from the FTF or other non-

SM interactions (Shensa et al., 2020). In the USA, depression diagnoses among youth increased from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2014 (Vidal et al., 2020). Concerns have arisen around the effects of SM on adolescents' mental health due to SM's association with decreased face-to-face interpersonal interactions. Higher internet use has been associated with positive social well-being, higher use of communication tools, and increased face-to-face conversations (Vidal et al., 2020). SM use has shown an association between SM use and depression in adolescents. At the same time, some aspects of SM use may benefit adolescent well-being, such as having diverse friendships and easily accessed support (Vidal et al., 2020). The issue should be highlighted that the extent of social media use may intensify depression symptoms depending on the social media environment. This research will explore whether social media use contributes to low self-esteem and depression, especially among young adults who often portray negative self-information on social networks, which is also related to low self-esteem. The study results will be used to determine if social connections help to eliminate depression or make it less severe.

Researchers developed AI to examine social media posts to see if the model could detect individuals who had scored in the clinically depressed range on a questionnaire. (Hussain et al., 2020). Social media users have an equally conflicting effect as they do on mental health, which has also left researchers in a dilemma. While some studies show that using social media can improve social capital and a little or no degree of depression and loneliness, such results are not universal, as other research reports the exact opposite (Dorrance Hall et al., 2020). The effect of social media use on the mental health of people

might be different based on many factors, such as age, gender, or how many they have friends. People, however, lack interpersonal connections or feel detached from a community, but on the other hand, the opportunity is seen to an end - a source of validation and social compensation (Shensa et al., 2020). It is implied that loneliness does not remove depression per se but only makes it less acute. Social media serves as a common method of dialogue among young adults to connect and get emotional support through social networks. However, reduced face-to-face emotional support is one of the new challenges social media brings (Hussain et al., 2020). Social media can be used to stimulate social isolation, but there is a challenge to depression (Hussain et al., 2020). There is a gap in understanding if people who are clinically depressed view social media more to cope or communicate with others to help with depressive symptoms.

Interpersonal Relationships

Loneliness can be described as the state in which a person feels that their current social companionship does not satisfy their need for a sense of belonging, and this often results in feelings of sadness and emptiness (Lin & Lachman., 2023). The case becomes more complexly intermingled in older adults, where loneliness is often the result of poverty and lack of enough social contact; loneliness then predicts cognitive deterioration, illness, mortality, and risk factors for depressive disorders (Kusumota et al., 2022). A wide array of ways individuals relate to each other goes on with people who practice active isolation, which involves spending a considerable amount of time alone, often with just a few people, but not feeling lonely. Discrepancy, instead of participation, will bring the difference between the actual social network and the personal social

preferences (Kusumota et al., 2022). As the ways people connect go further, active seclusion, which consists of spending a lot of time alone with just a few people but not feeling alone, is also considered. Another issue is technology addiction; people overuse their smartphones and then go digital instead of having physical interaction, negatively affecting the quality of their social connections. Others need to learn the border between fake identity and authentic self-identity. The syndrome of internet addiction is considered abnormal mental status, and its defining attributes include emotional detachment, impaired concentration, and avoiding social interaction (Subramanian, 2017). As our awareness of the adverse side effects of human-technology interactions increases, it can be seen more clearly that the Internet and social media have restructured communication and individual relations. The social media networking watershed has upturned how we interrelate with others, allowing us to communicate with millions at no cost. Social media, thanks to sites such as Facebook and Twitter, allow people to chat with thousands of people from various parts of the planet; we can see that social media has significant power to facilitate communication.

The influence of mass media has drawn little attention during the COVID-19 lockdown when it comes to one's psychiatric condition, mainly when the question refers to one's mental state (First et al., 2021). It is argued that previous studies establish that outbreaks of infectious diseases often coincide with adverse mental health. Researchers employed structural equation models to estimate direct and indirect relationships between proximity attributes identified. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that higher social media exposure was a predictor of worse psychological consequences, higher anxiety and

sentiment, as well as higher depression for adults (Hadan et al., 2024). Coronavirus could be about hospital images that are too packed or medical professionals carrying various kinds of protection equipment as they do their jobs. This content might be devastating for so many, and it does mitigate the fact that there is data about the virus on the Internet, which could be challenging to process (Zhenhua et al., 2022). This research shows that the more individuals are exposed to the disaster, the more they might stress. The study fails to explain how viruses, media consumption, and communication experience all concur to affect mental health.

Clinical Depression

Clinical depression, a widespread mental health disorder, continues to rise in prevalence, posing significant public health challenges (Szlyk et al., 2020). Major depressive disorder (MDD) is the leading cause of disability among young adults, often resulting in severe emotional and social impairments (Prizeman et al., 2023). The role of stigma in mental health, particularly among younger individuals, discourages help-seeking behaviors and exacerbates depressive symptoms. Studies by Azem et al. (2023) and Primack et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of early diagnosis and treatment, highlighting the potential of social media as both a diagnostic tool and a support mechanism.

Despite the obvious fact that social media platforms can be an essential source of comfort and solidarity, use in excess can even further aggravate and worsen the symptoms of depression (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Adding some individuals to social media can lead to an unhealthy tendency to be absorbed in the virtual world and

remoteness from their dear ones without any fundamental interactions. These deaths may occur because of stress, confusion, and weariness, so it is necessary to be aware of the problem and seek help in such a situation. It has been proven that social networking sites can help people distressed by their negative sentiments. Depressed people benefit most when they use social networks to foster relationships with others (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Researchers can achieve this goal by sharing a positive self-image on social media. This is going to provide opportunities to receive positive feedback from other people. This positive feedback can lead to a good mood in the user, which “a serious impediment to emotional well-being” (Fitzgerald et al., 2022) can be riddled.

Actively using social media could be considered a positive thing because it helps people stay connected and informed. It can act as a channel through which people can share opinions, express themselves, and connect with people having the same interests. Social media also provides a feeling of acceptance and family, even for those who may be lonely or old in their real life (Fu et al., 2022). Passive use of social media can cause mental health issues. For example, upward social comparison occurs when users compare their lives to those who have better lives or are more successful. An individual may experience these emotions, such as an inferiority complex, low confidence, and even depression. The excessive use of social media may cause loneliness, especially for people with no relationships. People might develop an addiction to social media to fulfill their social assurance and validation needs, and once it does not meet their desires, the individuals might experience negative feelings (Fu et al., 2022). Loneliness plays an essential role in the quality of one’s mental health, especially if it takes place eventually.

It might result in anxiety or depression, as well as other prevalent mental health problems. Loneliness entails the variations between the provided and desired social support levels. However, it is uncertain how people with depression see their interpersonal relationships and social media.

Summary

Social media could create multiple functions that are fulfilled by several social needs, such as communication, information, and entertainment (Houghton et al., 2020). Strong evidence exists showing that although social media use boosts social interaction, it also challenges mental health, an issue that could cause anxiety and depression (Hussain et al., 2020). People might be addicted to social media to fulfill their social assurance and validation needs, which, once not met, might cause negative feelings (Fu et al., 2022). As evidenced in the literature, there is a possible association between social media usage and depressive symptoms; however, this relationship is not clear from the perspective of clinically depressed individuals (Lee et al., 2020). This study was anchored on the uses and gratification (U & G) theory by Blumler and Katz (1974). Given that clinical depression is a pervasive issue (Szlyk et al., 2020) and the increased use of social media is associated with depression (Shensa et al., 2020), this qualitative phenomenological study was necessary to understand how individuals who use social media perceive their depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationships among clinically depressed individuals.

Chapter 3 will delve into the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological study. I will discuss the methods used to analyze the gathered data. The chapter will also

discuss the dependability of the results obtained from the analysis and the ethical procedures to ensure that the research's credibility is not compromised. Chapter 3 will provide a detailed description of the research approach and how informed consent was obtained.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted to examine the perceptions of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. The study relied on qualitative research design through in-depth semi structured interviews with individuals who are diagnosed with clinical depression. The following sections of this chapter provide details on the research design, clarifying the rationale for selecting the qualitative methodology. I also discuss the participant selection criteria, data collection methods, and data analysis framework as well as ethical considerations pertinent to the study. The study was designed to offer valuable insights to close the knowledge gap while at the same time providing implications for support strategies, therapeutic interventions, and recommendations for future research focused on mental health and social media usage.

Research Design and Rationale

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of individuals who are diagnosed with clinical depression and their experiences with their social media use and interpersonal relationships, answering the research question: How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experiences? As qualitative research, the intention was to understand the intertwining phenomenon of people's perceptions regarding the implications of social media usage on their daily lives. The research tradition chosen for this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology is used to examine how people make meaning of their lived experiences and the essence of such

feelings as perceived (Rolleri, 2023). This approach was suitable for this study because it allowed me to comprehensively investigate the respondents' experiences and perceptions concerning social media utilization and its influence on interpersonal interactions and depression (Rolleri, 2023). Phenomenology is an appropriate approach to capture the complexity and depth of lived experiences (Gallifa, 2018). While using phenomenology, the aim was to capture the realities of the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals, revealing detailed and rich data on their social media interactions and interpersonal relationships.

This study involved semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data representing the participants' true experiences, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes (Burns et al., 2022). Ensuring wide-ranging and meaningful examinations of study topics, a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions was developed to allow further probes into the participants' responses. Semi-structured interviews are flexible, permitting researchers to prompt the study respondents further to get a deeper understanding of the discussion areas, ensuring that a holistic view of the participants' lived experiences is captured (Gallifa, 2018). I also recorded the interviews to ensure the participants' narratives were documented accurately and provided a transcript for analysis and interpretation. A field test was conducted before data collection using a small sample of participants. The goal was to refine the interview to foster relevance and clarity, improving the study findings' validity and reliability.

Role of Researcher

I explored the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals on their social media use, their depressive symptoms, and their interpersonal relationships. I was primarily an observer in the study. This aspect facilitated a comfortable environment for the participants to discuss their experiences openly. I maintained professionalism and ensured objectivity while collecting and analyzing data.

I did not have an ongoing or prior connection with the study participants. I recognized the possibility of power relationships and biases. I used the bracketing technique to identify and set aside personal preconceptions and beliefs concerning the subject of the study. Using bracketing ensured that data collection analysis reflected the participants' perspectives rather than my assumptions or expectations (Roger et al., 2018).

This study focused on vulnerable populations and discussed their online interactions and mental health issues. Ethical considerations are imperative during research. To navigate the pertinent ethical considerations, I issued informed consent to ensure participants understood the purpose of the study, their role, and the right to opt out of the study without any ramifications. I maintained the confidentiality of the respondents to protect their privacy and eliminate the risk of harm due to the study. Further, I recognized power dynamics and potential bias. Reflexive practices were used, including a reflective journal and peer debriefing. Through this approach, I critically examined their interactions with the respondents, biases, and role to foster a respectful, inclusive, and ethical research environment.

This study was conducted through online interviews. As such, I ensured that the Zoom technology lacked barriers to the participants. In the event of technical challenges, alternative arrangements such as face-to-face or phone interviews were considered to facilitate their participation in the study. I remained reflexive and open, maintained ethical rigor, and conducted a research study that yielded valuable information on the lived experiences of social media use and interpersonal relationships among clinically depressed individuals. I also maintained the highest standards for respect and integrity.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The participants for this study were recruited from a population of clinically depressed individuals actively using social media platforms. Purposive sampling was used because of the limited resources for this study. Purposive sampling, commonly employed in qualitative studies, involves selecting research subjects with predetermined experience or knowledge (Staller, 2021). Purposeful sampling is a widely recognized approach that involves selecting individuals or organizations with extensive knowledge or experience about a particular topic (Campbell et al., 2020). The purposive sampling approach was chosen to ensure that every participant could provide deep, insightful perspectives based on their encounters with depression and social media. Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling acknowledges the significance of participant selection in qualitative research, where the depth and relevance of information surpass the need for statistical representation (Campbell et al., 2020; Staller, 2021). Snowball sampling was used if the primary recruiting method did not yield the number of participants needed.

This approach involved asking the current participants to refer other individuals who met the criteria for inclusion in the study (Leighton et al., 2021). By selecting cases with in-depth expertise or experience, I gained valuable insights and a deeper understanding of the studied topic.

This study specifically focused on adults aged 18-65. The participants were diagnosed with clinical depression. They were also active and regular users of different social media networks. The premise guiding the selection of this demographic was the presumption of their unique experiences to illuminate how their social media interactions contributed to their depressive symptoms and social and interpersonal relationships. The pervasive nature of clinical depression, coupled with the increasing utilization of social media in the contemporary world, presents an imperative field for a thorough inquiry to understand the phenomenon.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to determine the suitability of the participants in this qualitative phenomenological study. This aspect ensured that the research sample was aligned with and appropriate for the study objectives. The criteria remained vital to define population boundaries for the study, fostering the findings' reliability and usefulness. The following criteria were met for the potential participants to be selected for this study. The participants were adults (men or women) aged 18-65 to capture a thorough spectrum of their experiences. Participants were diagnosed with depression and are also currently in treatment with depression before being involved in this study. This criterion ensured that the participants had some lived experiences

concerning the focus of the research. The individuals were proficient in English to facilitate reliable data through clear communication. Participants were in a relationship with their partner and living with their significant other/partner. The average individual spends at least 37 minutes or 2 hours online (Méndez-Díaz et al., 2022). Another study stated that individuals in this study reported their time spent on social media was approximately 3 hours per day (Brunborg et al., 2019). Thus, participants in this study were on social media for 2 hours daily.

The following exclusion criteria were applied to maintain the study's focus and integrity. Those under age 18 were not considered for participation in the study.

Participants who were not diagnosed with clinical depression did not meet the criteria to ensure that they had sufficient time to experience and reflect on their condition about social media use. Individuals who used social media for less than 2 hours daily since their experiences did not reflect social media's influence on mental health. Individuals with limited English proficiency or non-English speakers were not included, as the research required individuals who could present their experiences in detail and clearly.

Participants who were not in a relationship or did not live with their partner were also excluded.

Determining the Number of Study Participants

While the study initially targeted enrolling eight to 12 participants, this range is flexibly designed to accommodate data saturation (Guest et al., 2020). This concept was pivotal in qualitative research, signifying the point at which further data collection ceases to uncover new thematic insights. The specified range allowed the study to adapt

participant numbers based on ongoing analysis and ensured a thorough exploration of the subject matter without unnecessary redundancy.

Recruitment and Enrollment Procedures

Platforms for mental health advocacy, special social media groups, and online forums were used for targeted outreach, asking eligible participants to enroll in the study. I also posted recruitment information on Facebook on my own page. All interested parties were contacted and informed of the study purpose and screened to see if they met the inclusion criteria. The information disseminated for recruitment included the purpose of the study, participant roles and requirements, and confidentiality strategies to attract potential volunteers. The participants were engaged in a direct personal interview to affirm their willingness and eligibility to participate. An informed consent form stating the participants' rights, voluntary participation, and ethical considerations was issued to the participants to sign before participating in the study. An interview was scheduled after the participant signed and returned the informed consent form.

Sampling and Time Constraints Due to Saturation

The initial number of participants was eight to 12 individuals. Further changes were made in the data-collecting process to ensure theme saturation. A major feature was the collection size and data saturation process. Using this methodology, I focused on capturing different stories under one theme without losing the depth of personal accounts. The consistent and detailed description shows that this study was committed to using rigorous methods according to ethical standards and that it helps follow-up studies with the same approach. This study was refined using suitable methods and details of selecting

participants to examine social media usage, clinical depression, and interpersonal relationships.

Field Test

I solicited professionals with considerable training and experience in the domains of social media utilization, clinical depression, and qualitative research methods, which helped me to carry out this crucial phase. A clear line was drawn between the experts and the study participants to apply objectivity and integrity to the feedback process and differentiate them from the study population. This group comprised a panel that analyzed the questions carefully and criticized the study's validity and completeness.

To ensure the credibility and diversity of the experts' opinions, I selected experts from different disciplines, namely clinical psychology and psychiatry. The steps for building up the reliability of the study findings included selecting experts and instituting a formal feedback process. This implied that the clinical psychologist had read and answered all the interview questions.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for data collection for this qualitative phenomenological study on the experiences of clinically depressed Individuals actively using social media and its influence on their depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationships. The interview protocol included some demographic information about the participants (age, gender, education, race/ethnicity which is typically collected to describe them and consider if the sample is diverse. The semi-structured interviews were the primary data source because they comprehensively

examined participants' feelings, experiences, and perceptions regarding a certain phenomenon (Gallifa, 2018).

Due to this sensitive topic, I conducted check-ins during this interview to ensure the participants were fit to continue the study. The check-in questions included asking the participants if they were okay and if they would like a break. I checked in with the participants every four questions during the interview process. I stopped the interview questions and checked in sooner if the participants showed signs of emotional distress. If the participant stated they were not fit to continue the study, I would have discontinued the interview and discarded the data.

Data Collection Instruments and Sources

Semi-structured Interview Protocol

The primary data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol included open-ended questions to allow a thorough engagement with the participants because of its flexibility and allowance for probing questions. This approach allowed for the collection of detailed and rich data relevant to creating awareness of the complex interplay between the participants' social media usage, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships. The interview protocol was research-based and was specifically designed for this research.

Observation Notes

Apart from the interviews, I used observation notes to collect data. The interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing, which allowed a setting for realistic observations. The notes included emotional responses and other non-verbal cues relevant

to the study. The observations helped augment the data collected using the semi-structured interviews, thus improving the context of the generated information.

Sufficiency of Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews in a qualitative phenomenological study are suitable when examining the participants' subjective experiences (Gallifa,2018),In this research, the interview protocol helped to collect sufficient data on the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals, including their social media usage and its influence on their depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationships, using their perspectives. The research-based protocol ensured that the data collection questions aligned with the study objectives to realize meaningful and relevant data. Adding observation notes and archival data helped to enrich the main interview data, allowing for a thorough investigation of the study topic. The instruments combined helped to capture the multifaceted nature of the respondents' experiences, providing valuable ideas on their social media use and its influence on their social relations and depressive symptoms.

Data Collection Process

Before the interviews, the participants were issued an Informed Consent form (Appendix C). The form helped to capture details about the study's purpose, participants' rights, and procedures used during the research process. The document helped ensure the respondents were informed about the intended research. Their consent and signing of the form implied they understood and were willing to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview protocol was the primary instrument for data collection. It included open-ended questions to allow a thorough engagement with the

participants. The open-ended nature of the interview protocol allowed for flexibility, ensuring that the researcher could ask probing questions to collect rich and detailed data (Gallifa, 2018). The interview questions were focused on comprehending the lived experiences of the participants, particularly on their social media use and its effects on their depressive symptoms and interpersonal relationships. The participants were given ten-dollar Amazon or Walmart gift cards for their time.

The interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform during the data collection process. The widely used platform allows interviews to be conducted irrespective of the participants' geographical location. The interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. This aspect increased the participants' diversity. Using Zoom helped facilitate high-quality audio recording to ensure accurate transcription of the collected data. I used high-quality microphones to ensure clear audio. All participation and confidentiality forms were securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer, which only I could access. The participant's information will be stored on my computer for five years. The confidentiality of the participants was of utmost importance, and all data obtained were kept confidential. During the interview, the participants were also informed that they had the right to discontinue the interview at any time. The recorded information was deleted for participants who refused to continue the interview.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain the highest ethical standards, the study included several measures: To maintain the highest ethical standards, the study included several measures: (a) Participants were notified that they could drop out from the study at any time without any

fear of penalty, (b) A debriefing was offered at the end of each interview to allow participants to respond to any concerns or questions they had. Resources were provided to the participants if discussing their experiences was difficult.

Commitment to Objectivity

Objectivity, combined with open-mindedness, is an essential attribute for pursuing research. Steps were taken to mitigate personal biases and ensure that the entire research process, i.e., data collection to analysis, is accomplished conscientiously and fairly with consideration of participants' experiences. The commitment lay in being actively attentive and providing a compassionate and secure setting for the participants to express themselves.

Data Analysis

This study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) during the data analysis approach. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), stresses understanding the experiences and perceptions of the study participants (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). The main Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), goal is to know how an individual perceives certain occurrences, events, or arguing episodes and their interpretation of them (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Whether participatory and involving the people is the leading quality of the Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), programs. In this way, opportunities opened for the interviewees to tell their stories, authored in their own words, without bias or distortion (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). In this research, Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), was used as a strategy to understand the realities and experiences of people who were clinically depressed.

In this study, I positioned myself at the viewpoint of the explored population, using open-ended questions to generate new findings. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), empowers researchers to identify the patterns of thoughts and feelings that are the most intricate and gives them insights into the experiences of the people under study (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). By using a refined understanding of personal experiences, the approach helps researchers bring in the opportunity to offer unique insights that cannot be achieved using traditional methods only (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). Advanced coding strategies were used to examine several questions asked and their answers from the interviewees.

The study included using Clarke's and Braun's (2022) six Steps of Reflexive Thematic Analysis for data analysis. The authors describe thematic analysis as a method used to identify, analyze, and condense patterns or themes in data (Clark & Braun, 2022). The first step is to get acquainted with the data by dedicating a significant amount of time to engage with it to understand its scope and complexity thoroughly. (b) Step 2: Generating initial codes involves systematically categorizing the fascinating data characteristics across the collection to gather relevant information for each code. Different hues will be employed during notetaking to emphasize uniform norms; (c) Step 3: Conducting an initial theme search - Categorizing codes into potential topics and gathering all relevant information related to each topic; (d) Step 4: Developing and accessing themes involves creating a thematic map that confirms the relationship between the themes, the coded extracts, and the whole data set, (d) Step 5: Defining and naming topics involves doing ongoing analysis to provide accurate definitions and labels for each

subject. This process aims to improve the level of information for each theme and improve the overall understanding conveyed by the research and (e) Step 6: Report production involves selecting compelling extract samples, doing a comprehensive analysis of a select few extracts, establishing connections between the analysis and relevant literature and research topics, and authoring a report documenting the study.

I incorporated trustworthiness in Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), by remaining truthful and ensuring the research is conducted in its original natural setting without altering its location. Trustworthiness is crucial for impacting change in a research project's original context and developing a knowledge base to support societal change. For example, the way interviews are carried out, transcriptions are produced, and categories formed based on transcriptions will not be altered.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness illustrates whether a given research study could be dependable. It illustrates the confidence level in data collection, analysis, and interpretations, as well as the methods and procedures used during the research (Nowell et al., 2017). The trustworthiness concept includes various elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Looking into the complexities of lived experiences and perspectives differentiates qualitative research from other types of research. Trustworthiness helps to examine people's unique views to understand the phenomenon's subjective nature. Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensures that collected data accurately mirrors study participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability to achieve trustworthiness in its findings. The trustworthiness of this research study depended on the participants' honesty level. Data detailing the topics under investigation were reliably presented. This process entailed collecting safe and reliable data and ensuring that the aspects of the population sampled were reflected in the study findings.

Credibility

When discussing credibility in any qualitative research, it refers to the level of surety around the fact that the given data is credible. Ensuring that the data accurately captures the respondents' experiences is essential. This is achieved through developing credibility and trust in the qualitative research approach (Nowell et al., 2017). This research must be credible by having accurate information reflecting participant experiences about what is being studied. This involved collecting valid data and ensuring all respondents' voices and opinions were considered while documenting the study results. This also involved using suitable methods for collecting data, providing full details about the purpose to participants, and reducing sources of errors or confounding variables that could affect findings. One of the possible ways is to choose appropriate approaches to collecting information so that the individuals can comprehend the research's primary aim and consideration to minimize the chances of any bias or confounding variables that might affect the results. To further improve credibility, I used triangulation, including making observations and interviews and using archival data. Member checking ensured credible data, and transcripts were sent to the participants to authenticate their accuracy.

Transferability

Synonymous with generalizability, transferability establishes the likelihood of research study findings being replicated in other contexts, times, populations, or settings (Nowell et al., 2017). It is an approach that involves looking into the values, meanings, and beliefs of individuals from the society that generated the experiences of individuals. Transferability, which encompasses appropriateness and relevance, should be met to ensure that the derived research results are significant outside the setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A rich and detailed description of the study procedures and methods was provided to ensure transferability. I addressed the study questions in full detail, explaining each aspect of the research. The participants learned the basic research methodologies and techniques used to collect the data and some specific approaches examined in quantitative research, such as observation, interviews, and focus groups. The respondents fully understand this study and the research process.

Dependability

Dependability is related to reliability and refers to the degree to which a study might be conducted again and yield the same results by a different researcher (Adler, 2022). To ensure dependability, this study relied on expert reviews to ensure the research questions were relevant to the topic of study.

Confirmability

Confirmability entails ensuring that the collected data and subsequent analysis are based solely on the experiences and perspectives of the study participants but not on personal biases or biased interpretations of the researcher (Amin et al., 2020). To ensure

confirmability, I presented results that objectively reflect the information obtained from the participants. The information gathered was presented without any subjective interpretation or bias I will have. To ensure the research findings were unbiased, I used journaling to document the participants' thoughts, feelings, and assumptions during the research process to make them aware of any assumptions or biases that could affect the study findings.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the requisite ethical standards are maintained, I took various measures during the study, such as giving informed consent to participants to explain their rights and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. The confidentiality of the participants was safeguarded by using pseudonyms rather than the participants' actual names. At the end of each interview, debriefing sessions were conducted to address questions or concerns from the participants. Any needed resources were provided to the participants if any distress arose from the study. Before the interview, each participant received the informed consent form, which included details of the study goals and associated risks and benefits (Reynolds et al., 2022).

If the participant expressed verbal consent, I took their consent and recorded it down. I kept a copy of every participant's consent, with the details of their understanding and consent, which was documented and filed on record. Participation in this research was made up of volunteers, and participants could, at any point, withdraw from the study. This process was explained at the beginning and end of the interview process. I further clarified that the participants had the right to decide whether they wanted to participate in

the study and were free to withdraw their consent at any time. A consent form was emailed to all participants to be completed and returned to the researcher before the study could proceed.

This aspect aimed to ensure the study reflected the participants' lived experiences as shared. I used bracketing and reflexive journals to address potential personal biases. I upheld respect for the study participants. A safe and comfortable environment for the semi-structured interviews was ensured. All participation and confidentiality forms were securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer. It will be stored on a hard-locked computer that only I can access for five (5) years. The confidentiality of the participants is of utmost importance, and all data obtained were kept confidential (Reynolds et al., 2022).

The collected data were analyzed to ensure the anonymity of the participants, and the results were presented in aggregate form to protect their privacy. The study was conducted with the highest ethical standards to ensure the safety and protection of the individuals. As a researcher, maintaining confidentiality was paramount to establishing trust with the participants. Participants might reveal sensitive information that they expect to remain confidential and not be disclosed to unauthorized individuals or entities. I protected the participants' rights and dignity by ensuring complete confidentiality of their information.

Only data relevant to the study was collected to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants' information. By doing so, researchers minimized the risk of infringing on privacy. I removed or obscured confidential information, such as

personal identifiers, from the data as early as possible during the data processing phase. This was done to ensure that the participants' identities were safeguarded. Researchers can protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality by removing or obscuring personal identifiers from the data.

This study was conducted with the utmost care and attention to ethical standards to ensure the safety and protection of individual participants. I carefully selected participants based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to promote transparency and open communication. The IRB review process is thorough and comprehensive, and it involves a detailed examination of the research proposal, including the study design, data collection methods, and potential risks and benefits to participants (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Summary

Chapter 3 detailed the methods and procedures for this qualitative phenomenological study. The study was based on phenomenology, which is the research tradition. Participants were drawn from clinically depressed individuals actively using social media networks to understand clinical depressive individuals and their interpersonal relationships. The primary data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interpretative phenomenological analysis helped to guide the data analysis, which was conducted using the NVivo software. I upheld ethical practices through informed consent, respect for the participants, and maintaining their anonymity through pseudonyms. Trustworthiness was also achieved by ensuring the study's

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter 4 will discuss the findings of this

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted to examine the perceptions of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. The research question that was addressed was “How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experiences?” In this chapter, I will describe the research environment, how recruitment was conducted through social media, and how participants were recruited using purposive sampling. I will also explain how data were collected through open-ended interviews and present the participants’ demographics. I will also review the data analysis and the themes identified and discuss the trustworthiness of the findings.

Demographics

Ten participants met the inclusion criteria. There were two male and eight female participants (see Table 1). The participants use social media for at least 4 hours daily and are currently in therapy. The participants range from ages 25 to 50. I did not conduct any other demographic questions.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age
P1	Female	48
P2	Female	50
P3	Male	41
P4	Female	28
P5	Male	40
P6	Female	27
P7	Female	25
P8	Female	37

P9	Female	43
P10	Female	54

Data Collection

Data were collected as soon as IRB approval. Sixteen participants contacted me to participate in the study, but six participants did not meet the criteria, and one of the participants scheduled a Zoom meeting but did not appear. The ten participants preferred to do Zoom audio so they could feel comfortable discussing their experiences. Participants participated in a confidential audio-recorded interview that lasted up to 60 minutes. The participants responded fully and openly according to their experiences and perspectives. After the Zoom meeting, each participant was emailed their interview transcripts. Eight women and two men participated in the study. The participants were asked to check and verify the transcripts to ensure the message was accurate. Two participants replied, stating that transcripts were accurate, but the other eight participants did not respond.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative information begins with identifying themes and patterns dependent on the coding data process (Spinoso-Di Piano, 2023). Qualitative analysis involves organization, arrangement, and the addition of significance to data collection. Data collection is chaotic, vague, lengthy, artistic, and attractive. Collecting data is not precise and does not progress linearly (Spinoso-Di Piano, 2023). Qualitative data analysis involves probing for broad statements about associations among categories of information.

Analyzing the interview transcripts can be a first step (Creswell & Báez, 2020).

The analysis was accomplished by reading the transcripts of the interviews and reflecting on field notes. Then, the data were transcribed, member checked by the participants, and then coded, coding, which entailed condensing and analyzing the majority of information in the data in parts and categories. While coding is a part of the analytical process, it is not the process itself. However, it is possible to pre-code investigations to score the responses quickly (Creswell & Báez, 2020). The researcher can score or classify any unanticipated responses as “other.” Pre-coding is more successful when the research is culturally neutral and if the researcher uses a construct of the social setting before the study itself (Spinoso-Di Piano, 2023). I used Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), during the data analysis approach in this study. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) addressed the understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the study participants (Sangeorzan et al., 2019). The main Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), goal was to know how the participant perceives certain occurrences, events, or arguing episodes and their interpretation of them (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

I used Clarke’s and Braun’s (2022) six steps of reflexive thematic analysis for data analysis. First, I got acquainted with the data. Then I generated initial codes, which involves gathering relevant information for each code. Step 3 was conducting an initial theme search, and Step 4 involved developing and accessing themes. In Step 5, I defined and named topics involves, doing ongoing analysis to provide accurate themes. Finally, I reported production between the analysis and relevant literature and research topics and authoring a report documenting the study.

The Zoom recordings interviews were downloaded and transferred to NVivo 15 to transcribe the data. After uploading to NVivo, I reviewed the transcripts and coding to ensure accuracy and consistency. Findings were analyzed to answer the research question: How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experience? Any other responses that did not align with the study research question or other participant responses will be discussed in this chapter.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this qualitative research study, I complied with applying credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to achieve trustworthiness in the findings. The trustworthiness of this research study depended on the participants' honesty level, making sure that the data were precise and consistent, collecting safe and reliable data, and ensuring that the aspects of the population sampled are reflected in the study findings.

Credibility

The credibility of research can be enhanced by spending an adequate amount of time with the participants and persistently observing (Houghton et al., 2013). The researcher must spend adequate time with the participants to fully understand the phenomenon being investigated (Houghton et al., 2013). This study's credibility relied on trustworthiness and honesty when reporting the results. I used the computer and Zoom voice audio recording as the data collector to collect accurate data. I added notes to the data for accuracy during the Zoom video recording, increasing credibility. I ensured the

participants understood the research to minimize any bias affecting the data collection. Triangulation was applied by using data-collected information and any observations through the audio recording. I also used member checking to ensure the credibility of the data and transcripts sent to the participants. The participants did not have any changes to their transcripts.

Transferability

Transferability is a process of abstraction used to apply information drawn from specific persons, settings, and eras to others that have not been directly studied (Drisko, 2024). This involves describing the details of the study (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 16). Transferability in this research involved providing a rich and detailed description of the study procedures and methods before interviewing the participants. I addressed the study questions in full detail, explaining each aspect of the research. To ensure transferability, I incorporated detailed descriptions of the participants' social media use and documented the findings and concepts of each participant.

Dependability

Dependability in this study was achieved by using follow-up questions and comments to ensure the dependability was accurate throughout the study. Other strategies included interviewing protocols, voice recorders, transcripts, and editing tools. Participants willingly engaged in open transparency about their experiences with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships.

Confirmability

A semi-structured interview was used for confirmability to help guide the interview process. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their experiences on their perceptions of clinical depression, their social media usage, and their interpersonal relationships. I documented my reflections in a journal based on the confirmability findings.

Results

Ten participants, men and women aged 25-54, consented to participate in the Zoom audio conferencing. The open-ended questions allowed participants to share their perceptions and experiences of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. The research question was “How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experience?” The themes were (a) emotions of social media use, (b) navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media, (c) the increase of suicidal ideation, (d) increase of depressed mood, and (d) the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships. See Figure 1 for a word cloud that led to these themes.

Figure 1

Theme Word Cloud



Theme 1: Emotions of Social Media Use

Of all participants engaged in using social media, six out of 10 stated using social media caused mixed emotions. Participants described a wide range of emotions related to their social media use. Participant 1 indicated,

When depression comes, social media comes, and I'm arguing with my husband because he doesn't understand why I'm on social media so much. Why I'm acting the way I'm acting. It's kind of like a cycle. I get we argue more like I'm more snappy. I'm short. I got an attitude, or I'm sad and don't really understand why.

Participant 3 shared,

I think the use of social media has definitely negatively impacted my depressive symptoms and exacerbated them. Which then, in turn, has impacted how I view myself and in relation to like all my interpersonal relationships. Majority of the emotions are sadness, anxiety, fear, and a little bit of paranoia as well.

Participant 4 shared,

My husband and I have been trying to get pregnant for almost two years, and every time I see social media, everyone is having a kid, and it's very irritating and it's very frustrating, and it's hard to look at. I get frustrated. I'm sad. So, I guess it ranges from sad, irritated to an occasional happy.

Participant 5 indicated,

I used to compare myself to everybody on social media, and that would put me in a state of depression. Now, if I am depressed and I get on social media, it just makes me, I guess, envious and more sad when I'm looking through it.

Participant 6 reported,

I just find myself always on social media, scrolling. It's just like I find comfort in social media, just scrolling social media, going through people's content, and it kind of distracts me from feeling really sad and bad about myself. I just get overwhelmed with feeling sad or unhappy about myself.

Participant 7 reported,

Sometimes I'm on social media, and then I like to see something that's really sad or even that's not necessarily sad but that I relate to in like a sad way, and then I'm like okay, I think I'm done, and I get like really upset. Most of the time like, if I get really depressed, I'll cut off like social media and interpersonal relationships with people in my life. I get like really sad and depressed, like more than just, oh my gosh, that's terrible. It like really hits me hard.

Participant 8 reported,

I follow a lot of shelters, but unfortunately, I had to stop doing that because there

were things that were being posted on some of these shelter pages that literally would ruin my day because there might be like an animal that was abused or something. And then they would show the actual pictures and it literally would affect my entire day because it was so sad.

Participant 9 reported,

I'm having trouble actually falling asleep, and I get up middle of the night due to racing thoughts sometimes and just feeling down on myself. But thankfully, I'm able to work, which is really nice for me. But I do see that it is starting to creep into my work, unfortunately. I feel like when I use social media, I get on there because, you know, I was like, I feel I need to be uplifted. But I noticed that when I get on there, I'm just a little sad.

Each participant shared that while being depressed, social media makes them happy. Sixty percent of the interviewed participants feel happy while using social media. Participant 1 indicated, "I feel like it's aimlessly scrolling until I see a video that triggers an emotion. Like I see a video that makes me happy or sad, and that's the emotion that I have." Participant 2 reported,

So I like to look at Facebook or TikTok and look at like happy things. I took a lot of pictures of my dog, and my dog is on TikTok. Just try to find happy stories and dormant stories where people encourage you to do this or, you know, there's something uplifting about doing social media.

Participant 4 indicated, "Say it can help when there's like happy, positive things on there. And it can help the relationship because it can be something to share or

something to look at together. But I would say that's about it." Participant 5 stated,

In our depressed state, when we're don't feel like doing anything, we're normally just either on the computer, just scrolling through social media, or we're on our phones scrolling through social media. And then when we see other people seem to be more happy. I try to make it generally happy now. Like I try to clean up my page pretty well. I try to fill all my social media pretty well to make it generally happy.

Participant 6 reported,

I just watch other people's activities, and sometimes I see something that excites me, and it makes me feel happy and feel more in control of myself. Okay, in my relationship, it's basically the only way that I communicate with my partner. Maybe sometimes if you want to drop an information for me, it's easier for him to reach me on social media than on direct call.

Participant 7 reported,

If I like purposefully consume positive media through social media then that helps my depression and it kind of like helps me e when I'm heightened and like I'm overstimulated it kind of like regulates me and brings me down sometimes when I'm watching like really positive things and my husband knows that and so he'll be like why don't you go watch some fun videos or why don't you google some dog videos and I'm like you're right.

Theme 2: Navigating the Feelings of Isolation While Using Social Media

Another emerging theme that each participant shared was their perceptions and

experiences of isolation. Participants noted that sometimes their isolation could be avoiding people and social media use altogether. Participant 1 explained,

My depression is like, I would say, like isolation, like I isolate myself, like I have to be alone a lot. Like I lose interest in things that I normally have an interest in. Sometimes I eat a lot, or I don't eat at all. Then comes I'm arguing with my husband because he doesn't understand why I'm on social media so much. Why I'm acting the way I'm acting. It's kind of like a cycle. And my husband he doesn't really deal with depression. So there are often times when he doesn't really understand what I'm going through or why.

Participant 2 stated,

So, it's funny because my husband is on Facebook, but he doesn't do Instagram or TikTok, and I'm always trying to send him stuff subliminal messages about how I feel, and I don't feel like talking. But he likes to send me messages of like cheerful messages and scriptures and stuff of that nature to cheer me up. Also, my friends who do have them know something is wrong with me. I will isolate myself and be alone sometimes.

Participant 3 explained,

I don't see the point of it. I don't see how it is allowing for growth. And all I can see is like the negative attributes that it's kind of manifested, from things like fear of missing out to, like, social isolation to anxiety to like, depression to depressive symptoms to even, like, body image issue. And even insomnia from the fear of missing out essentially. So I don't see how social media is doing anything positive

or productive for our society now. Whereas like my partner, she's constantly on, constantly posting, which then it doesn't create strife, but it definitely creates the void in me, which creates depression in me, which then secondarily impacts our dynamic, if that makes sense.

Participant 4 said

My depression looks like I feel like good on the outside, terrible on the inside at times. With it looking inward, it's feeling very alone. To be 100% honest, my husband and I have been trying to get pregnant for almost two years, and every time I see social media, everyone is having a kid and it's very irritating and it's very frustrating and it's hard to look at. I would say just kind of withdrew.

Participant 5 added, "In my life, it mainly shows itself in periods of time when I just don't feel like doing anything, where I won't go out with friends. I'll like to be alone." Participant 6 added,

My communication has become very bad and limited, and I spend more time with myself, like alone at home. I do not enjoy people's company anymore. So I just tend to push a lot of people away, not intentionally, because it feels safer being alone, being with myself.

Participant 7 explained, "I would isolate myself, and that's usually like a turning point, and in me being like okay, maybe I need to reach out to the people that I love because I'm really sad." Participant 9 stated,

I feel currently that my depression is affecting my interpersonal relationships because I am beginning; I guess sometimes I'd like to isolate myself because I

feel like I'm a burden. Um, again, it because social media isolates us, so what will make me isolate him and kind of push him away when I am able to find those recipes or when I am able to find places I might want to travel to that kind of look fun, but not too overcrowded and stuff like that. I do feel it strengthens our relationship.

Participant 10 explained

I think my depression is isolating myself, especially when I feel that sense of overwhelming. I'm more of a homebody anyway, but I really noticed that I like particularly stay in my bedroom and do things like on my phone or reading a book. I kind of like silence. I will make excuses of not wanting to go out, or just if I do go out, it's for a very limited time. And then, you know, I'll make an excuse I have to go because I might like social batteries kind of like already at 5%.

Theme 3: The Increase of Suicidal Ideation

Only five participants reported their experiences with their thought process while being depressed. Participant 1 indicated,

My experience, it can get dark. I've had suicidal ideations. I've not left the house for days. It's pretty bad. I did self-harm before. So, yeah, it can get pretty deep. That's why I say I try to stay away from the hole because once I fall into it, it's hard to get out of it. Okay.

Participant 3 explained,

So, I've struggled with depression my whole life. I've had chronic depression with suicidal ideation, and it shows up honestly when I least expect it. It's been

consistently present. I don't know how else to explain it, but it's not based on the situation. It's just kind of consistently there.

Participant 6 suggested,

Yeah, I feel a lot lonely. I feel so much lonely, and it actually started sometime in 2021 when I lost my dad. I realized that after sometimes I was losing interest in a lot of things, in the people around me, in activities around me, and it got to a point where I became suicidal. But thankfully, I've gone through that period of time. I'm getting better, but a lot of times, I still struggle with the feeling of being very lonely, of hating myself, or maybe if there were some things I maybe if I'd done differently in the time back, I wouldn't have been in the condition where I am. A lot of times, I feel very guilty and unhappy and alone.

Participant 8 explained,

Um, not wanting to get out of bed, not wanting to be people, um, just kind of disconnecting from the world, which is dangerous. Like, I don't know, um, if we've touched on like suicide out of the year at all, but, um, not anymore, but like during COVID and stuff like that did cross my mind a lot. Like I was almost idolizing, like, oh, if I take my own life, like it'll all stop.

Participant 9 stated

I think they play off of each other, honestly, because previously I did used to have suicidal ideations because of social media use and being able to see the difference of how different I was, I guess you can say, comparing everybody else and their relationships, to my relationships. So, it's a lot of comparison. I have issues

focusing sometimes. Like I said previously, I did have a suicide ideation before.

Theme 4: Increase of Depressed Mood

Six participants discussed their experiences with irritability and depression and how they use social media to help cope with their depression symptoms. Participant 2 stated,

And if you do know me, it can still be frustrating because you're trying to get in and show me love and show me affection. And I just push it away because I don't want to be bothered with it right now, or I'm irritable because I just feel like I'm such in a dark state of mind.

Participant 3 added

So, I think I have had depression my whole life, basically a loss of interest, apathy, irritability, sometimes insomnia, sometimes it's hypersomnia, loss of interest in a lot of things, existing in a fog, really difficult time concentrating, trouble with focus.

Participant 4 stated

I feel like I put on a show on social media, and in my personal life, it's very different. I can get very irritable going through different people's social media or even being on social media. Okay. I would say that they relate with... I definitely have trouble focusing when people are talking, and I feel like those are kind of intermingled. I would say, again, the mental exhaustion, not being able to be present at times, and definitely having a lower tolerance. So irritability is a common thing that's in between my personal life and my relationships.

Participant 8 stated

It just like exasperates that because it like is a constant reminder of, you know, like, oh, I don't look that way that I should, or I don't have this like idea of, I don't have that life of perfection that is shown on social media. So, it creates this pressure. And then I also feel like it makes me feel irritable a lot because then it's like, I get mad at myself for not having that same, I guess, aesthetic look. And then I noticed that I might snap at other people around me or have less ability to regulate my emotions. So, irritability really comes out of that, too. Because, like, after you look at social, or after I look at social media for a while, and I see all this stuff that obviously like I'm not ever going to live up to because I know in my mind that it's Photoshopped, but when you're looking at it, you still compare yourself.

Participant 9 explained

I don't want to put my problems on to them because when I am irritable, I care about them so much. I kind of keep everything to myself. I don't let them know the true me when they ask me how I'm feeling. I'll tell them, oh, yeah, I'm doing fine, or I'm feeling so much better now. You know, life is going great. But deep down, you know, I'm really not so like I can't let them too close because then they'll be able to see through the lies that I tell sometimes, not to say that my depression is bad all the time, because I do have great moments, which is why I'm able to be in a relationship and we've been together for so long.

Participant 10 concluded

I think my depression is isolating me, especially when I feel that sense of overwhelming. I'm more of a homebody anyway, but I really noticed that I particularly like to stay in my bedroom and do things like on my phone or reading a book. I kind of like silence. I don't like a lot of loud noises because that will make me become more agitated and irritable.

Theme 5: The Impact of Social Media Use, Depression and Relationships

Seven participants describe their experiences with social media and how it impacts their relationships and depression symptoms. Participant 1 reported

I feel like it's more like a cycle, like I'm depressed and I'm on social media. It's like all the cycle. When depression comes, social media comes. Then comes I'm arguing with my husband because he doesn't understand why I'm on social media so much. Why I'm acting the way I'm acting. It's kind of like a cycle.

Participant 2 reported

So, my husband and I been married for 23 years together. He's very good at recognizing when I'm going through depression. He's open and honest with me about at times he feels like I need to get help at that time or if there's something but it's nothing that he can do here to get help for me. It's a lot of memes that express how you feel at that moment in time that sometimes you like to go and post how you feel that day. You feel judged because somebody post something, and it might be pertaining to you or someone else and people pass judgment and opinion on it and you feel overwhelmed and bullied.

Participant 3 reported

So my wife and I we're both on social media. She is more active than I am.

Mainly because I don't have a lot of family around, nor do I have a lot of things to post about. So, I'm not as active and that creates a void, which then it manifests as depression. So, it just makes it a lot worse and harder to deal with. And there's this silent competition, feeling like I'm not showing up enough on social media. So if my wife is on social media a lot, that creates a void for me, and exacerbates my negative symptoms. Which then can provoke my animosity towards social media and then transitively, that could also create worsening depression and then impact my dynamic as well. So, it's definitely a cluster for sure. It could definitely all impact each other.

Participant 5 reported

My wife is actually really awesome at noticing when I am depressed. And over the last couple of years, when she notices, she'll just, after we put the kids down and everything, we go to bed, she'll just ask like, hey, what's wrong? Let's talk about it. And we have a chance to talk it out. So, with her, that's great.

Unfortunately, if she's not around, like if I'm on a business trip or wherever else, and I don't have that person to talk it out with, normally I withdraw from everybody else. A lot of times now for managing depression symptoms when using social media is if I'm able to recognize that I'm in a depressed state or a depressed mood or if my wife's able to realize it, I won't even get on the computer or my phone nearly as much.

Participant 8 stated

So, it definitely relates because it affects like my desire to be intimate with my husband. It affects my desire to want to hang out with people or like even socialize. So, I will say it definitely has like a negative effect because it's like, if I don't want to be intimate with my husband, then he thinks that it's something about him or like, he's not attractive, or he's not good enough for me or something. Because when you're coming from a headspace that's been like infiltrated by all this negative crap from social media, then you like get frustrated, you get irritated again, like your social battery might not be like recharged. I might not be able to really have the capacity to like have a conversation with somebody. I might already be like deciding that it's going to be a bad day.

Participant 9 stated

But when I get on social media, it makes me feel worse, even though my intentions of using social media is for something positive, because I'm trying to share what's going on in my life and catch up with family and show my partner this or look at this funny video, but it only lasts for so long? I try to be mindful of how much I am on social media, because I noticed like if I'm on it, and I start scrolling too much, and I kind of start getting really down on myself. I feel that I project that onto my partner. He doesn't like that very much. Because then he was just like, why are you always so negative? I snapped back, you know, I make big arguments happen for some reason, just because like, again, if I'm on social media for too long, I do take the internal aspects of it out on him externally. He'll know like, oh, how long were you doing this for?

Participant 10 stated

I think it's my lack of confidence. I don't want to say I don't trust my significant other, but I think when he's on social media, I kind of like see what he's looking at because I'm nervous that he may see a prettier girl who's more fit than me or just looks different than me. I don't have that confidence. I mean, I do have confidence. I just don't have that confidence enough yet, which I'm still working on. I think in a way that affects me a little bit of and thankfully he's very understanding. But again, it's hard because I don't want him to think like he's the reason he's doing anything because it's a me problem. I know, like I've owned up to that. So, I think a lot of that has to do with, you know, what people are putting on social media and if he's actually looking or if he's just scrolling because he can't control what other people put out there.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the participants' demographics, data analysis, data collection procedure, and the results. This chapter highlighted the open-interview process of gaining participant consent to participate in the study. Based on the data analysis, five themes showed what the participants were experiencing. The reported themes were emotions of social media use, navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media, the increase of suicidal ideation, the increase of depressed mood, the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of the research questions. I will also discuss limitations, recommendations, and implications for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological research study explored the perceptions of individuals with clinical depression on their social media usage and their interpersonal relationships. I investigated how individuals between the ages of 18-65 who are depressed discuss their experiences of being in a relationship while using social media. The aim was to explore the lived experiences of clinically depressed individuals while also focusing on their perceptions of the interplay between social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships. The research was guided by the question “How do clinically depressed individuals perceive the interconnections between their social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships in their lived experiences?” Participants shared their experiences and perspectives on their clinical depression and how they view their interpersonal relationships and social media usage. The findings demonstrated a complex relationship with the use of social media. While social media use was perceived to be helpful for some participants in their relationships, the results also showed that social media was not helpful for relationships. Chapter 5 will include the interpretation of the findings, study limitations, recommendations, implications, theoretical framework, and conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study expands on existing peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. The findings were consistent with existing peer-reviewed literature, but there were also some unexpected results. The themes that were generated from the semistructured interview included emotions of social media use, navigating the feelings of isolation

while using social media, the increase of suicidal ideation, increase of depressed mood, and the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships.

Contrasting findings, it was expected that individuals who are depressed while using social media would report that they became more depressed, lacked face-to-face interactions, and neglect their significant other/partner needs. However, some participants reported that social media provided a space to help manage their suicidal thoughts. This finding contrasts with prior literature emphasizing primarily harmful effects and highlights a nuanced role for social media as both a risk and a resource for individuals (Meshi & Elithorpe, 2021). Further, several of the participants perceived social media as helping with depression and strengthening relationships with significant others/partners. However, participants reported mixed emotions regarding their social media, depression, and their relationships with their significant other/partner. For example, when discussing both themes of navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media and increase of depressed mood, participants noted that social media exacerbated depressed symptoms when viewing sad things on social media; thus, the way social media was seen as impacting depressive symptoms depending on the content of that media. An increase in problematic social media use reduces real-life social support, which is associated with increased depression, anxiety, and social isolation (Meshi & Elithorpe, 2021). However, the increasing overreliance on digital networks creates social isolation and depression (Fu et al., 2022).

Findings that supported the literature, one theme that correspond with recent literature is the emotions of social media use. Social media platforms create functions that

fulfill several social needs, such as communication, information, and entertainment (Houghton et al., 2020). Using these platforms can create a way for individuals to connect and build relationships. Participant 4 noted that social media can help when there are positive things to look at and share.

Themes that were consistent with uses and gratification (U & G) theory was emotions of social media use, navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media, increase of depressed mood, and the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships. Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratification (U & G) theory is founded on a pioneering media theory that depicts how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy several personal contingencies. Participants' use of social media to fulfill emotional needs, such as seeking validation through likes and comments, aligns with the uses and gratification (U & G) theory framework's focus on media as a means of gratification. Participants stated that social media helped with their relationship, and they would utilize social media to connect with their significant other. Using this helped to explain better the possible gratifications that arose from social media use and how such fulfilments connect with their depression and interpersonal relationships. The theme that did not align with uses and gratification (U & G) theory was the increase of suicidal ideation.

The participants felt that while being depressed, social media can be a positive source of communication with their significant other. Actively using social media could be considered a positive thing because it helps people stay connected and informed. It can act as a channel through which people can share opinions, express themselves, and

connect with people having the same interests (Fu et al., 2022). Participant 4 noted that social media can be a happy place and help the relationship because it can be something to share or look at together. Participant 5 agreed that people who are happy on social media tend to be happier and clean up their social media to be happy.

Participants also discussed the negative aspects of social media and how they believe it impacts their relationships. When discussing the theme, the increase of depressed mood, Participant 8 accounted that social media makes them feel pressured all the time to have that aesthetic look and compare themselves to social media, which caused them to become more depressed. The participant noted that after they become depressed, they would isolate themselves. The findings also highlighted that individuals who are depressed tend to isolate themselves from their partners and use social media to help cope with their depression symptoms. The participants described that they would isolate themselves from social media and did not seek validation as they prefer to be alone. This theme corresponds with recent literature. Regular engagement with social media may foster a perception that others lead happier, more socially connected lives, thereby heightening feelings of social isolation and ultimately contributing to depression (Vagka et al., 2024)

While some participants viewed social media as harmful, others believed it could be positive. Participants described their emotions of social media use. Some participants found when discussing theme emotions of social media use that social media helped manage their depression by providing uplifting content such as funny videos or shared activities with a partner. For instance, looking at funny videos to help build their bond

with their significant other. Participant 4 indicated that social media helps the relationship. Some participants viewed that social media helps them get over their depression by connecting to depression groups and being able to talk and create a safe space for healing.

In contrast, others viewed social media as harmful to their psychological state. When discussing theme, the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships, some participants reported that their significant other spends time on social media, and each time they are on social media they believe their significant other is looking at other women, which causes the participant to have anxiety and become more depressed. Participant 10 stated they were nervous that their significant other/ partner might use social media to look at prettier girls and were insecure about how they viewed social media. While others view social media can be addictive and it is not helping them emotionally or physically.

Houghton et al. (2020) also stated that individuals increase their reliance on social media websites to fulfill their psychological and emotional needs. Consistent with the literature, this study highlighted that individuals who are depressed use social media to fulfill that avoidance. Sixty percent of study participants stated that using social media caused mixed emotions, while fifty percent of participants reported their experiences with their thought processes while being depressed. While using social media to help foster connections or happiness, some participants addressed their concerns with isolation. In Chapter 2, with existing literature, a wide array of ways individuals relate to each other goes on with people who practice active isolation, which involves spending a

considerable amount of time alone, often with just a few people, but not feeling lonely (Kusumota et al., 2022). Participant 3 accounted that social media does not help with their depression. It brings them a fear of missing out on things, social isolation, anxiety, depression, and even body image issues.

Participant 5 accounts of feeling happy while strolling through on the phone with their partner when discussing theme emotions of social media use. Participant 9 thinks that during the depression stage, they tend to isolate themselves from their partner. Conversely, social media can sometimes bring them together by looking at recipes to do stuff together. Participants 5 and 9 discussed how social media can make them happy while isolating themselves from significant others to use social media. These findings also affirmed that individuals who are depressed tend to isolate themselves from their significant other. When discussing themes of emotions of social media use, navigating the feelings of isolation while using social media, the increase of suicidal ideation, increase of depressed mood, and the impact of social media use, depression, and relationships. The findings also confirmed that social media can be a powerful tool to help individuals who are depressed connect with their significant other. This study helped to confirm many establishing findings on clinically depressed individuals' perspectives of social media and their interpersonal relationships. This study also challenged some assumptions about social media usage and its impact on interpersonal relationships.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations in this study; one limitation is the lack of generalizability due to the small sample size, comprising only two men and eight women.

Another limitation is the use of Zoom audio-only interviews which limited the ability to observe nonverbal cues, which might have provided additional insights into participants' emotional states. Another limitation is that I didn't assess social media use to determine how much participants were using it. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and future research.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research should extend from the limitations. Similar studies with different populations or adding a quantitative component measuring social media use and depressive symptoms would be reasonable recommendations. Because the type of social media seemed to be an issue, assessing the media that is accessed would also be a good recommendation.

Another recommendation is that future research could explore male participants ages 18-65 experience with their depression and social media usage and how their emotions when using social media impact their interpersonal relationships. Emerging adults are defined as interactive consumers and producers of highly curated, rapidly changing online content; they continually view posts from friends, social media influencers, and advertisers, all of whom serve as sources of comparison and reminders of how they should look (Taylor & Nichter et al., 2024). However, men and women have different needs for fostering emotional openness online and offline (Taylor & Nichter et al., 2024). Such norms prescribe how men should ideally act and behave to be approved by the collective. The norms may often include encouragement to suppress emotions and expressions coded as feminine, such as empathy, care, and vulnerability (Nordin et al.,

2024). To bring up loneliness seemed to be particularly difficult because of the stigma and embarrassment associated with loneliness, which further discouraged the men from discussing such problems and feelings (Nordin et al., 2024). To promote social connectivity among men interventions should focus on fostering a sense of belonging within family, work, and community environments while also creating spaces for help-seeking (Nordin et al., 2024). This will help the individuals understand if social media could bring out positive or negative emotions in their relationship. This will also strengthen relationships and mental health communities. Given the limited representation of male participants, future studies should explore how social media use affects emotional regulation and relationship dynamics differently across genders.

Implications

I contribute emerging evidence, which provides insights into the lived experience of clinically depressed individuals who perceive their interpersonal relationships while using social media. The findings shed light that if the kind of social media that is engaged with makes a difference, people should be encouraged to engage with healthy social media and be more aware of social media that negatively affects them.

Clinicians could guide patients toward curating positive social media experiences, such as following supportive communities or reducing exposure to triggering content. The findings might help people reflect on how their social media use may be related to mood and interpersonal issues, and to use social media more mindfully. By understanding the perceived changes in social media use among clinically depressed individuals,

educators can provide them with appropriate resources to manage their situation, such as hotline numbers for assistance.

The study may provide valuable information that can help clinically depressed individuals maintain interpersonal relationships. Policymakers could encourage social media platforms to implement features that promote mental well-being, such as content filters, limited screen timing, or mental health resources. There are many ways that mental health moderators can improve such spaces for positive outcomes. One example is mass media campaigns that directly and indirectly create positive or mitigate negative health-related behavior changes across large populations (Curran et al., 2023).

Concurrent availability and access to key services and products are vital to persuade individuals motivated by media messages to react positively. Creating policies that support opportunities for change provides additional motivation, whereas policy enforcement can discourage unhealthy or unsafe behaviors. Public relations or media advocacy campaigns that help to shape the treatment of a public health issue by news and entertainment media also represent a promising complementary strategy to conventional media campaigns (Curran et al., 2023).

Various obstacles to mass media campaign success exist. Pervasive marketing for competing products or with opposing messages and social norm power frequently means that positive campaign outcomes are not sustained. A greater and longer-term investment will be required to extend the effects (Rath et al., 2021). The increasingly fractured and cluttered media environment challenges achieving adequate exposure to planned media

messages rather than making wide exposure easier. Therefore, planning and testing campaign content and format with target audiences are critical.

Conclusion

I highlighted the paradoxical nature of social media for clinically depressed individuals: while it can foster connection and emotional support, it also exacerbates isolation and negative self-comparison. I've also helped to expose significant mental health issues and how individuals who are depressed communicate and interact with their significant other/ companion while using social media. By exploring these lived experiences, the research underscores the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by clinically depressed individuals. The therapist could work with individuals who reported suicidal ideation to find other outlets or sources of social media to help with depressed symptoms. This study will help advocate for future research investigating race, gender, and social media content to help foster a more inclusive and supportive digital environment. Social media can help to facilitate human connection, excessive use can lead to a paradoxical sense of isolation, indicating a shift in the quality of human connection in the digital age, where superficial online interactions may not fully satisfy our need for deep, meaningful relationships, potentially contributing to feelings of loneliness and depression, even when surrounded by a large online network (Azem et al., 2023). Research shows that social media platforms can be useful tools to help identify individuals at risk for depression and to provide intervention. Given the increasing social media use and the substantial mental health issues and deaths associated

with depression worldwide, the positive association found between social media use and depression has vital implications for future research and intervention.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. Your participation will help to understand better the experiences of clinical depression and how they perceive their interpersonal relationship and social media usage. Before we proceed with the interview, I would like to confirm that you are still willing to participate and provide your valuable input. I want to assure you that I have all the necessary information about the research and that no further queries must be addressed. I also want to inform you that you can withdraw from the study anytime. If there is a question that you are not comfortable asking, you can skip it at any given time. The participant must be between ages 18-65 years old. The participants can participate if they have Zoom. Both males and females can participate in this study.

1. What is your depression like: how does it show itself in your life?
2. How does your depression and social media use relate to each other?
3. How do your depression and personal relationships with your significant other and other important people in your life relate to each other?
4. How do you think your relationships and your social media use relate to each other?
5. How do you think those three things, social media use, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal relationships all interact with each other? I.e., significant other, friends, spouse, etc... and if so, how?
6. How does your depression interfere with your interpersonal relationships?
7. Please describe your perception of social media. Be as detailed as

possible.

8. How do you manage your depression symptoms and your relationship when using social media?
9. Do you think that social media usage has any relationship with your depression symptoms..... If so, how?
10. What are the typical emotions you encounter while engaging in social media?
11. How is social media helpful in your relationship?
12. How does social media usage help with both your depressive symptoms and your relationship?
13. Can you tell me your experience of what your depression looks like?
14. How does your depression interfere with your interpersonal relationships?

I thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your participation in this research study will provide insight into this important topic. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, I can be reached via email between 2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m. (EST). Thank you for taking part in our study. We appreciate your valuable contribution to our research. After the study, we will carefully analyze all the data collected and prepare a detailed report on the findings.

We will share the study results with you via email and a summary of the conclusions. You will also be provided with additional information, such as clarification on any questions you may have. Your data (responses) will be handled with utmost care and confidentiality. Per strict data protection policies, all information collected during the

study will be securely stored and destroyed five years after completion. Once again, thank you for your time and participation. Your contribution is essential to the success of this research, and your support is appreciated.