

Original Article

## The Relationship Between Purpose of Social Media Use, Social Support, Loneliness and Depression: A Sample of First Year University Students

**Tugba Uzuncakmak**

Assistant Professor Yozgat Bozok University Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Turkey

**Ayşe Sener Taplak**

Assistant Professor Yozgat Bozok University Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Turkey

**Sevinc Polat**

Professor Yozgat Bozok University Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, Turkey

**Correspondence:** Tugba Uzuncakmak, Yozgat Bozok University Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nursing, e-mail:tugba.uzuncakmak@yobu.edu.tr, address: Yozgat Bozok University Erdogan Akdag Campus, Faculty of Health Sciences, Ataturk Road 7. Km No:66900 Yozgat, Turkey

### Abstract

**Aim:** This study was conducted to determine the relationship between the purpose of social media use, social support, loneliness and depression at university students.

**Method:** This descriptive study was carried with the 541 first year university student in a university at Turkey. Sociodemographic Data Collection Form, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, UCLA Loneliness Scale and Beck Depression Inventory were used to collect the data. The institutional permission, ethic approval and written consent were obtained. The descriptive statistical analyses and correlation analysis were used to assess the data.

**Results:** More than half of the students were female. It was determined that almost all of the students had a social media account and they used the social media for about 4 hours daily. Most of the students used the social media to chat with their friends. A weak, negative, significant relationship was found between social support and social media usage purposes except for sharing photo and chatting ( $p < 0.05$ ). There was a statistically weak, positive, significant relationship between social media use for entertainment, chatting, spending time, information source and loneliness. A weak, positive, significant relationship was determined between depression and social media usage purposes for entertainment and following others ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusions:** Significant and weak relationships were found between social media usage purposes, social support, loneliness and depression. It is recommended that the university counseling services can organize extracurricular social activities to reduce use of social media and support them in terms of social support, depression and loneliness.

**Key words:** depression; loneliness; social media use; social support; university students

### Introduction

Today, young people use the opportunities brought by technology. One of them is the use of social media applications. This applications are an area that allow users to share their emotions, thoughts, videos and news (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Hausmann et al., 2017). Social media has become an inseparable part of life due to its wide content and using every time in a daily life via mobile phones, tablets and computers (Keles et al., 2020).

It keeps a large place in young people's lives by providing an environment to present themselves in an online profile with pictures, life events and hobbies as they wish (Rice et al., 2016). Young people actively use social media for 3-4 hours a day and this is indicated as excessive (Riehm et al., 2019; Terzi et al., 2019). 80% of social media users is in the 16-24 age group at Turkey (Statista, 2020).

Excessive daily use of social media raises concerns about the effects on mental health

among young people. Studies reveal the relationship between social media use and depression (Shensa et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2017). On the other hand, it is emphasized that applications reduce loneliness when used to establish new relationships, but increase loneliness when used to avoid interaction in social life and escape negative emotions. At this point, it is important to examine the purposes of social media use on special groups such as young people (Nowland et al., 2018; Shettar et al., 2017).

In addition, young people prefer social media for communication and social support from acquaintances and use social media for longer periods of time (Shensa et al., 2020). However, it is stated that getting social support by communicating in this way is very low, weakens the social interaction and as the duration of use increases, the feelings of loneliness and depression increase (Liu et al., 2018; Marttila et al., 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to reveal the reasons why young people use social media and whether it is related to social support, loneliness and depression (Keles et al., 2020; Hanprathet et al., 2015).

Being in the first year of university has some difficulties for young people. Joining into a new environment, adaptation problems, difficulties in making new friends, socioeconomic and cultural reasons, being away from the family, insufficient social support sources and lack of social, scientific activities at universities may lead them to use the social media more. New university students use social media to communicate and cope with problems in order to adapt to their new environment (Kim et al., 2016; Seo et al., 2016).

There have been studies examining the effects of social media on mental health since the emergence of social media, there are still many questions seeking answers. Comprehensive studies are needed which identify the effects and causes of social media usage and the reasons that leading the young people to use the social media (Karim et al., 2020). The aim of this study was to reveal the relationship purposes of social media use, social support, loneliness and depression, draw attention to the importance of the social media use at first year university students. Our research questions are as the follows:

- What social media accounts do the students use?

- What are the purposes of social media use by the students?

- How long do the students use social media per a day?

- Is there a relationship between loneliness, depression and social support according to the purposes of social media use?

## Methods

**Study Design:** This study was a descriptive type and carried in 2018-2019 academic year.

**Participants:** The study population was composed of the first-year students in all faculties of the university. To select the sample group of the research firstly, faculties of the university were visited in the school days. 541 student who were informed about the research and accepted to participate in the study voluntarily were included in the sample. Literature (88 student 16.3%), engineering (100 student 18.5%), theology (100 student 18.5%), education (89 student 16.5%), economics (85 student 15.7%) and health sciences (79 student 14.6%) faculties were included in the research. Be a first-year student and voluntary to participate the study were the inclusion criteria of the study. The 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade university students and the students who were at first class at second time excluded the study.

**Data collection:** The data were collected by Sociodemographic Data Form, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, UCLA Loneliness Scale, and Beck Depression Inventory. The questionnaires were filled out by the students approximately 20-25 minutes.

Sociodemographic Form was composed two part and 11 questions. The first part included the questions about the age, gender and economic status of the students. The second part was composed of three open-ended questions about daily social media use, having the social media account (Facebook, Instagram etc.) and the purpose of social media use. Social media use was assessed by volunteers' self reported.

UCLA Loneliness Scale was developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson to measure the loneliness levels of the people (Russell, 1978). The Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale was also found to be 0.94. The reliability and validity study of the scale was conducted by Demir and Cronbach's Alpha value was found as 0.96. The scale is 4-point likert type, scores minimum 20 points and maximum 80 points. Total points

obtained in all of the items provides the 'general loneliness score'. As the score increases, the loneliness level increases (Demir, 1989). In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale was found as 0.86.

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was developed by Beck and adapted to Turkish by Hisli (Beck et al., 1961; Hisli, 1989). The scale consists 21 items and scores between 0-63 point. The each item in BDI aims to determine a behavioral pattern specific to depression. 0-9 point is considered as a minimal level of depressive symptoms; 10-16 point as a mild level of depressive symptoms, 17-29 point as a moderate level of depressive symptoms, and 30-63 point as a severe level of depressive symptoms.

In original version Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale was found the 0.86 and Hisli found the Cronbach's Alpha value as 0.80 (Beck et al., 1961; Hisli, 1989). In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale was found as 0.94

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet and the Cronbach's Alpha value was found as 0.85-0.91 (Zimet et al., 1988). Turkish reliability and validity study of the scale was conducted by Eker and Cronbach Alpha value was found as 0.80-0.95 (Eker & Arkar, 1995).

The scale consists of 12 items in 3 subgroups related to social support received from family,

friend and private person. This 7 likert-type scale scores between 12-84 point. High score signifies high perceived social support. In this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value of the scale was found as 0.92.

**Statistical analysis:** The SPSS 22.0 program was used to analyze data. Number, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used in the statistical analysis of the descriptive data. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess the data distribution. In line with distribution results, Spearman's correlation analysis was used in determining the relationship between the social media usage purposes and the social support, loneliness and depression scale scores.

**Ethical considerations:** Ethic approval from the Yozgat Bozok University Ethic Committee (ethic reference:2018/8) and institution permission were obtained. The participants were informed about the aim of the study and they signed the Informed Consent Form.

## Results

The mean age of the participants was  $19.39 \pm 0.918$  and 59.5% of them were female. It was determined that 66.6% of the young people lived in extended families, 53.6% of them had three or more siblings, and 59.1% had an equal income to expense. 45.7% of the participants stated that their school success was moderate (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The distribution of the descriptive characteristics of the participants (n=541)

Characteristics	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	322	59.5
Male	219	40.5
<b>Department</b>		
Science and Literature	88	16.3
Engineering	100	18.5
Theology	100	18.5
Education	89	16.5
Economics	85	15.6
Health	79	14.6
<b>Family type</b>		
Nuclear	144	26.6
Extended	360	66.6
Broken	37	6.8
<b>Number of siblings</b>		
No sibling	6	1.1
1-2 Siblings	245	45.3
3 or more siblings	290	53.6
<b>Income status</b>		

Income lower than expense	100	18.5
Income higher than expense	121	22.4
Income equal to expense	320	59.1
<b>School success</b>		
Very good	57	10.5
Good	187	34.6
Average	247	45.7
Bad	40	7.4
Very bad	10	1.8
<b>Age (Mean, SD)</b>	19.39±0.918	

91.5% of the young people had Whatsapp, 83.4% had Instagram and 59.0% had Facebook account. It was determined that the participants had social media accounts for 3.38±2.04 years and they used the social

media for 4.25±2.51 hours a day. 74.1% of the young people used the social media to chat their friends, and 73.6% for sharing photo, posts, music etc. (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The distribution of the social media use characteristics of the participants (n=541)

Characteristics	n	%
<b>The social media accounts used *</b>		
Facebook	319	59.0
Instagram	451	83.4
Twitter	252	46.6
Whatsapp	495	91.5
<b>The purpose of social media use*</b>		
For sharing photo, post etc.	398	73.6
For chatting	401	74.1
For entertainment	337	62.3
For following people	237	43.8
For socializing by joining the groups	223	41.2
For using as an information source	346	64.0
For spending time	352	65.1
<b>Social media use (years) (Mean, SD)</b>	3.38±2.04	
<b>Daily social media use (hours) (Mean, SD)</b>	4.25±2.51	

\*This question was answered more than once.

As seen in Table 3, a statistically significant, negative, weak correlation was found between the MSPSS and the social media use for the purposes of entertainment ( $r=-0.139$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), following people ( $r=-0.125$ ,  $p=0.004$ ), socializing ( $r=-0.104$ ,  $p=0.016$ ), information source ( $r=-0.116$ ,  $p=0.007$ ) and spending time ( $r=-0.097$ ,  $p=0.024$ ) (Table 3). A statistically significant, positive, weak correlation was found between

UCLA the loneliness scale and the social media use for purposes of chatting ( $r=0.099$ ,  $p=0.021$ ), entertainment ( $r=0.126$ ,  $p=0.003$ ), information source ( $r=0.120$ ,  $p=0.005$ ) and spending time ( $r=0.127$ ,  $p=0.003$ ) (Table 3). A statistically significant, positive, weak correlation was found between the BDI and social media use for the purposes of entertainment ( $r=0.124$ ,  $p=0.004$ ) and following others ( $r=0.101$ ,  $p=0.019$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The relationship between the purposes of social media use by the participants and MSPSS, UCLA Loneliness Scale and BDI

The purpose of social media use	MSPSS		UCLA Loneliness		BDI	
	r	p	r	p	r	p
For sharing photo, post etc.	-0.079	0.066	0.036	0.402	0.041	0.347
For chatting	-0.076	0.078	0.099	0.021	0.071	0.098
For entertainment	-0.139	0.001	0.126	0.003	0.124	0.004
For following others	-0.125	0.004	0.074	0.087	0.101	0.019
For socializing by joining the groups	-0.104	0.016	0.056	0.193	0.073	0.089
For using as an information source	-0.116	0.007	0.120	0.005	0.079	0.065
For spending time	-0.097	0.024	0.127	0.003	0.022	0.611

Spearman's correlation

## Discussion

The use of social media is more common at youth than other age groups on general population (McCrae et al., 2017). In the present study, it was determined that the young people use the social media a significant part of the day ( $4.25 \pm 2.51$  hour) and join at least one social media account. In a study conducted at Turkey it was determined that the majority of the students use social media between 2-4 hours a day (Terzi et al., 2019). In other study it was indicated that Facebook is used more than five hours a day (Mamun & Griffiths, 2019). Respectively Whatsapp and Instagram are preferred the most as social media accounts in this study. In other studies it was determined Facebook and Instagram are the most used social media accounts (Hussain, 2012; Saglam, 2018).

According to the results of the research, it can be said that young people social media usage times are similar and they use various social media accounts in line with their interests. As a result, the daily use of social media among young people is at a serious level. It is important to demonstrate the consequences and reasons of this overuse.

Social media is used for many purposes among young people. In this study, most of the students used the social media to chat with their friends. In a study with university students it was showed that they used the social media for academic activities and communicating with their friends (Hussain, 2012). In a study conducted with university students at Turkey it was reported that social media was used mostly for following

others and researching (Saglam, 2018). In the study on the social media motivations of adolescents, the satisfaction obtained from the use of social media has been determined as having a social environment, socializing, entertainment, leisure activities, relaxation and avoiding stress (Akçay, 2011). Our results are similar to the results in the literature. As a result, it can be said that young people use social media actively, especially for social purposes.

The effects of multi-purpose use of social media such as maintaining relationships, sharing information, expressing yourself, entertainment, following people, socializing and spending time appear in different ways. For example fear of missing shares, social comparison and the anxiety of their own appearance and desire to attract attention from others affect the mental health (Chou & Edge, 2012). In the studies, the relationship between social media use and depression in general was examined and a significant relationship was found (Shensa et al., 2018; Hoare et al., 2016).

Differently, in this study, the relationship between the depression levels of young people according to the purposes of social media use was examined and there was a positive significant but weak relationship between depression and social media use for entertainment and following people. In a similar study it was indicated that the people who use of social media for leisure activity and entertainment have been found to have high depressive symptoms (Hoare et al., 2016).

At literature it was indicated that comparing oneself to others on social media sites increases the risk of depression (Appel et al., 2016; Feinstein et al., 2013). Consequently, it is an important point to evaluate the effects of the use of social media together with the purposes of use. Young people use social media especially for entertainment and follow up purposes. The use of social media for follow-up can show that young people follow others' posts. This could be a reason for young people to experience depression by making comparison themselves to people with better living conditions.

In the literature, social media meets the needs of loyalty and loneliness by allowing young users to strengthen their ties with their existing friends and make new friends (Nowland et al., 2018; Shettar et al., 2017) but the use of social media has increased (Keles et al., 2020; Karim et al., 2020). In this study there was a positive significant but weak relationship between the loneliness levels of the young people who used the social media for chatting, entertainment, spending time and information source. It can be said that young people who feel lonely, apply to social media and spend time various purposes on social media.

Family, friends and their surroundings are a source of social support for young people. Social support which is one of the important issues at youth, contributes to the healthy maintenance of spiritual, emotional and cognitive development (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). In this study there was a negative significant but weak relationship between the social support levels of the young people who used the social media for entertainment, following people, socializing, spending time and information source. It was reported that if young people find difficulty in making friends face-to-face and need social support so seek friendship on social media (McCrae et al., 2017).

In a study indicated that as daily stress increases, adolescents need social support more and seek this support on social media (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Consequently, it can be said that if the social support of young people is strong, they do not use social media for different purposes such as entertainment, socializing, following etc.

Our study had a limitation. The sample contained only the first grade university students so the findings of the study may not generalizable to all

university students. Further research should be conducted on a larger sample containing all grade university students.

**Conclusion:** It was observed in the present study that the majority of young people use social media accounts. They are online on social media for a quarter of their daily active time outside of sleep. Social media is widely used for sharing and speaking purposes. The young people use Whatsapp and Instagram account most. There is a relationship between young people purposes of using social media and their loneliness, depression and social support levels. As the depression and loneliness levels of young people increase, their use of social media for entertainment and social purposes also increases. As young people social support increases, their use of social media for entertainment and social purposes decreases. At this point, university is the most suitable environment to prepare trainings on suitable use of social media and perform screenings for sensitive groups such as young people. University counseling services should determine social support, loneliness and depression levels of young people with health screening programs. Social, cultural, sport activities should be organized to provide social support by strengthening communication among young people and help them coping with depression and loneliness and decrease social media use.

**Ethical Approval:** This study was approved by the Yozgat Bozok University Ethical Review Board and institution permission were obtained Yozgat Bozok University. The participants were informed about the aim of the study and they signed the Informed Consent Form.

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