

**MIND OVER MEDIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE INTERSECTION  
BETWEEN SELF-ALIENATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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I, Khushi Borikar, certify that all research compliance requirements related to this Undergraduate Research Scholars thesis have been addressed with my Faculty Research Advisor prior to the collection of any data used in this final thesis submission.

This project required approval from the Texas A&M University Research Compliance & Biosafety office.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mind Over Media: An Examination of the Intersection Between Self-Alienation and Social Media

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An integral part of technological life, most social media platforms provide individuals with increased autonomy, allowing conscious choice. These networking sites allow users to be engaged for longer periods of time. The divergent effects of social media challenge people's ability to maintain a sense of meaning in life. In turn, this addiction can reduce their quality of life, academic achievement, and physical health, and hinder their energy level. It is important to determine common determinants of the social media issue and prevent further worsened mental health issues. Cross-sectional studies compare the use of social media to well-being outcomes. While other studies suggest more positive outcomes of social media use, such as greater life satisfaction. A review of current research addresses the underlying psychological mechanisms of excessive use of social media. In recent years, more people to participate either passively or actively in social media trends. The following thesis investigates the severity of addiction and its relation to free will in order to create an intervention program at TAMU. The research assessment was studied using an online self-report questionnaire that evaluates the attitudes and

behavioral changes in college students. In addition to free will and social media addiction, the survey analyzes external factors such as usage/habits, hours of sleep, demographics, and academic performance.

## **DEDICATION**

*To my friends, families, instructors, and peers who supported me throughout the research process.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

### **Contributors**

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The data analyzed for Mind over Media: An Examination of the Intersection Between Free Will and Social Media were provided by Dr. Joshua Hicks. All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media usage has become problematic. A source of worldwide concern, social media's habitual use plays a significant role in social behavior and interpersonal relationships. Sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat are tools for socialization, communication, and entertainment (Kocak, Varan, Dashtbali, Bennett, and Barner, 2023). The rapid surge of internet and social media usage has given everyone around the world fair and equal access to life-changing digital connectivity (Kemp, 2020). According to the Global Digital 2020 Overview, there were 3.80 billion social media users worldwide in January 2020, with this number increasing by more than 9 percent (321 million new users) since this time last year (Kemp, 2020). The ubiquity of social media usage has brought about the possibility of social media addiction, where individuals tend to exhibit compulsive behavior to use social media (Griffiths, 2000; Starcevic, 2013). Such addiction can become a host to potential adverse outcomes on mental health.

Numerous studies have proved that social media has a negative impact on mental health (Aktan, 2018). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) identifies “Facebook Depression” which is supposedly triggered by frequent usage of social media (Eraslan-Capan, 2015). Social media is used to validate one’s self-intent and experience - and in turn, reduce existential isolation (Meier & Reinecke, 2020). While other studies suggest more positive outcomes of social media use due to its heterogeneity, such as greater life satisfaction; psychosocial consequences of social media include elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Woods & Scott, 2016). Individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions may be more susceptible to media addiction and its negative impacts (Andreassen et al., 2017).



## **1.1 Meaning of Life**

The divergent effects of social media challenge people's ability to maintain a sense of meaning in life. They are influenced by 3 main forms of subjective isolation — emotional loneliness, social loneliness, and existential isolation (Helm et al., 2018). Meaning in life is dependent on the depth and overall usage of the networking site, whether it is passive or active use (Helm, Jimenez, Galgali, Edwards, E. Vail III, and Arndt, 2022). Adolescence is a vulnerable period of time where individuals are more susceptible to low self-esteem issues and increased onset of anxiety and depression (McLaughlin & King, 2015).

Recently, the pandemic has influenced greater psychological consequences (i.e low meaning in life) promoted through increased use of social media (Lin, 2021). Social media addiction can lead to a loss of time and productivity, which may result in individuals neglecting other important aspects of their lives such as personal relationships, hobbies, and career goals (Andreassen et al., 2017). This can lead to a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness, as individuals may feel unfulfilled and unsatisfied with their lives. Furthermore, social media addiction can also impact individuals' sense of self and identity. The constant comparison to others on social media can create feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, which may lead to individuals questioning their own worth and purpose in life (Tandoc et al., 2015).

## **1.2 Free Will**

Free will demonstrates that individuals can play an active role in their behavior. This feeds into the assumption that individual behavior is self-determined (Monterosso and Schwartz, 2020). On one hand, social media can limit an individual's free will by increasing their exposure to biased information online, which can severely diminish their ability to think (Pariser, 2011)

critically and independently. Carl Burr explains how “engagement is everything and engagement is essentially how much time the social media companies can get you to spend on their platform with advertisers trying to break your free will” (Burr, 2020). He believes that social media algorithms influence us beyond our conscientiousness in order to monitor our actions online. Increased technology dependency has influenced behavioral addiction resulting in a decrease in individual psychological free will (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2017). In addition, social media can also exert pressure on individuals to conform to social norms and expectations, thereby limiting their ability to act autonomously (Zhao & Li, 2019). The implicit connection to others on social media, regardless of the platform, can create pressure to conform. Social media addiction provides individuals with less control over their online selves and holds them to certain standards of appearance, behavior, and lifestyle, an overall decrease in free will.

### **1.3 Self-Alienation**

Influenced by the work of Karl Max, self-alienation is also known as self-estrangement, where a worker can feel isolated from their work, production, and others (Raekstad, 2015). In the context of social media and digital technology, its presence materializes in many ways.

Technology has made it easier for individuals across the world to communicate; however, has diminished the value of a genuine human connection (Adibifar, 2016). Social media platforms are designed to encourage users to construct a digital persona that is separate from their offline self, often leading to a sense of disconnection and fragmentation (Turkle, 2011). This can result in feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Christofides et al., 2009).

Self-alienation on social media is the pressure to present a perfect and idealized version of oneself (Fardouly et al., 2018). The constant comparison to others on social media can also lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Kross et al., 2013). This can result in individuals

distancing themselves from their true selves and instead presenting a curated version of themselves online (Manago et al., 2008). The constant need for validation through likes and comments can also lead to an individual's loss of sense of self and worth, as they begin to rely on external validation for their sense of self (Kraut et al., 1998).

#### **1.4 Purpose of Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the severity of social media addiction and its relation to self-alienation and mental health. Such a study is a relevant and important topic given the widespread use of social media and its potential impact on an individual's well-being. By studying social media addiction and mental health, doctors and researchers can implement effective prevention measures and strategies. Based on the Global Digital 2020 Overview, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook are four of the most used social media platforms which will be tested in the following study (Kemp, 2020). Moreover, over 98% of college-aged students are on social media, falling into a spiderweb trap of social networking (Zedd, 2023). Students in college are at a period in life where they are part of a critical developmental stage where they are learning to form their own values and thoughts. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the impact of excess social media on their development (Rosen et al., 2013).

The following is a survey-based assessment of mental health and social media addiction among students at Texas A&M University. The correlational analysis tested variables of interest (depression, worry, authentic living, self-alienation, and free will). We tested the hypothesis that social media addiction increases feelings of self-alienation, as well as other measures of mental health.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Participants

We recruited 325 undergraduate students through the randomized subject pool at Texas A&M University, all of whom were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and received course credit for their participation. We excluded 24 participants for not completing the survey, 13 were removed because they indicated that their data were not valid (seriousness check), and 1 was removed for not responding to the seriousness check. Our final sample included 287 participants.

### 2.2 Materials and Procedures

Participants completed an online survey designed with multiple-choice questions. It was administered through Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform, during the early months of February through March of 2023. The research received approval from the university's institutional review board and was conducted using guidelines provided by faculty advisor, Dr. Joshua Hicks.

### 2.3 Measures

#### 2.3.1 *FAD Free Will*

Participants responded to 7 items using the Belief in Free Will Subscale of the Free Will and Scientific Determinism Questionnaire (Paulus and Carey, 2011). These items were intended to measure an individual's beliefs about the extent to which individuals have control over their own behavior and the outcomes of their lives (e.g., "People must take full responsibility for any bad choices they make."). These items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (strongly agree;  $\alpha = .75$ ,  $M = 25.01$ ,  $SD = 4.57$ ).

### 2.3.2 *BSMAS Media Addiction*

To evaluate an individual's addiction to social media, participants completed the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) (Andreassen, 2012). This scale was used to examine the prevalence and correlates of social media addiction and to explore the relationship between social media addiction and various outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and academic performance. The BSMAS consisted of six items that assess addiction: salience (social media use becomes the most important activity in a person's life), mood modification (using social media to regulate mood or to alleviate negative emotions), tolerance (needing to spend increasing amounts of time on social media to achieve the desired effect), withdrawal symptoms (experiencing negative emotions or physical symptoms when social media use is restricted or discontinued), conflict (social media use causing problems in personal or professional relationships), and relapse (returning to excessive social media use after a period of abstinence) (e.g., "I feel the urge to use social media more and more."). Each item was scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree;  $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 20.94$ ,  $SD = 6.45$ ).

### 2.3.3 *ESM Social Media Use Media Preoccupation*

Participants responded to 9 items that measure an individual's preoccupation with social media using the ESM Social Media Use Questionnaire E-SMUQ (Lin, 2016). The questionnaire consists of items that assess the following: frequency (how often the individual uses social media), duration (how long the individual spends on social media during each use), inhibition (whether the individual experiences difficulty in stopping or limiting their social media use), emotion regulation (whether the individual uses social media to regulate their emotions), cognitive salience (whether the individual thinks about social media frequently or obsessively),

and negative consequences (whether the individual experiences negative consequences as a result of their social media use). Each item was scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree;  $\alpha = .31$ ,  $M = 18.70$ ,  $SD = 4.54$ ).

#### 2.3.4 Worry (PSWQ-3)

To evaluate the individuals' level of worry, participants completed the Penn State Worry Questionnaire-3 (PSWQ-3) (Meyer, Miller, Metzger, and Borkovec, 1990). The scale consists of 3 items (e.g., "many situations make me worry," "once I start worrying, I can't stop," "I worry all the time"). The items are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all typical of me) to 5 (very typical of me;  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 9.25$ ,  $SD = 3.31$ ). Although we were primarily concerned with self-alienation, free will, and meaning in life associations with social media addiction, we included this measure for exploratory purposes.

#### 2.3.5 Wood Authentic Living Scale

Participants completed the Authentic Living Scale (ALS) as a measure of an individual's level of self-authenticity (Wood, 2008). This scale has been used to examine psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and positive social relationships (e.g., "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs"). The items were scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me very well;  $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 21.74$ ,  $SD = 3.76$ ). Although we were primarily concerned with self-alienation, free will, and meaning in life associations with social media addiction, we included this measure for exploratory purposes.

#### 2.3.6 Beck Depression Inventory

To evaluate the severity of depressive symptoms in individuals, participants completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), also known as the Beck Depression Score (Beck, 1996). The BDI consists of 21 items that assess a range of depressive symptoms, including sadness, loss

of pleasure, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal ideation (e.g., “I do not feel like a failure”(1), “I feel I have failed more than the average person”(2), “As I look back on my life, all I can see are a lot of failures”(3), “I feel I am a complete failure as a person”(4)). The items were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater severity of depressive symptoms, indicating minimal depressive symptoms, mild to moderate depression, moderate to severe depression, and severe depression ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $M = 10.55$ ;  $SD = 8.45$ ).

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

The study was analyzed using SPSS, a statistical software program commonly used in social science research. By using SPSS, we were able to explore the relationships between different variables in the dataset, such as media addiction, media preoccupation, free will, authenticity, self-alienation, depression, and worry. To accurately identify correlational relationships, we used descriptive statistics to summarize the characteristics of the sample, such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies. In addition, we also used correlation analyses to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between different variables. Overall, the combination of Qualtrics and SPSS allowed us to collect and analyze large amounts of data efficiently and effectively, providing valuable insights into the relationships between media addiction, self-alienation, depression, and worry among college students.

The correlational analysis testing variables of interest (depression, worry, authentic living, self-alienation, free will) indicated a strong association between social media addiction and the outcome variables. However, social media preoccupation was not strongly correlated with the variables of interest ( $\alpha = .31$ ;  $M = 18.70$ ;  $SD = 4.54$ ). Exploratory mediation tested how social media use influenced the idea of alienation. Increased use of social media resulted in

adverse effects of depression and worry (see Table A.2) and this was mediated by feelings of self-alienation.

Based on the data, authenticity scored an average of 21.74 ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and  $n=4$ . This suggests that authenticity and social media addiction are strongly correlated with one another. Among the 281 respondents, the average media preoccupation score was 18.70 ( $\alpha = .31$ ). Based on the data, there were 283 respondents within the social media addiction category. Of those 283 respondents, the average (mean) score for media addiction was 20.94 ( $n=6$ ) and  $\alpha = .72$ . The data showed that out of the 283 respondents, an average (mean) score was 20.94 ( $n=6$ ) and  $\alpha = .72$  for media addiction. In comparison to self-alienation, where 288 respondents averaged (mean) score of 12.28 ( $n=4$ ) and  $\alpha = .90$ . Depression had an average (mean) score of 10.55 ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and  $n=20$ . Worry Score (PSWQ-3) had an average of 9.25 ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and  $n=3$ . FAD Free Will had an average (mean) score of 25.01 ( $\alpha = .75$ ). In comparison to the social media addiction score, free will and media addiction are strongly correlated.



### 3. DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Media Preoccupation

In comparison to media addiction ( $\alpha = .72$ ) and self-alienation ( $\alpha = .90$ ) scores, media preoccupation was significantly lower. This is surprising because it was hypothesized that increased levels of media consumption are directly correlated with higher levels of media addiction in college students. Media preoccupation is defined as the climate of increased use of media that can lead to negative impacts and pose risks for emotional and mental problems in the future (Henzel, 2021). However, with the low media preoccupation score, it can be said (for the indicated sample size) that using social media more does not affect the level of addiction and self-alienation that student goes through. Based on the results, media addiction and preoccupation share similarities; however, they do not pose a causal relationship. Not everyone who is preoccupied with media is addicted to it, and not everyone who uses media excessively has a true addiction (Henzel, 2021). Media preoccupation can be a natural and healthy interest in media content, especially in the digital age where media consumption is a common way to stay informed, entertained, and connected with others (Starcevic, 2013). It can be a form of leisure activity or a way to unwind after a busy day. However, if the use of media starts to interfere with other aspects of one's life, such as work, school, or relationships, then it may be a sign of addiction (Andreassen et al., 2017).

#### 3.2 Media Addiction

On average, the respondent in the study reported engaging in media use to a degree that is “addictive.” Media addiction can refer to excessive or compulsive use of various forms of media, such as social media, video games, streaming services, or online browsing. When media use

starts to interfere with daily life, responsibilities, and relationships, it can become a problem (Griffiths, 2000; Starcevic, 2013). College students may be particularly vulnerable to media addiction due to the high availability and accessibility of media platforms, as well as the pressures and stress of academic work and social life (Aktan, 2018).

In addition, the study suggests that the correlation between self-alienation and media addiction was significant enough to decipher ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Adibifar, 2016). This suggests that there is a strong association between the two outcome variables. Self-alienation refers to a feeling of disconnection or estrangement from oneself, others, or society. Media addiction, as mentioned earlier, refers to excessive or compulsive use of various forms of media that can interfere with daily life and responsibilities. The finding of a significant correlation between self-alienation and media addiction suggests that college students who experience self-alienation may be more likely to engage in problematic media use. This may be because media use can provide a sense of escape or distraction from negative feelings or experiences (Aktan, 2018).

Other factors, such as personality traits, social context, or underlying mental health conditions, may also contribute to both self-alienation and media addiction (Adibifar, 2016). Further research may be needed to better understand the relationship between self-alienation and media addiction among college students and to develop effective interventions that address both issues.

### **3.3 Self-Alienation**

Obsessive social media use is detrimental to youth and their well-being. Findings revealed that students who are addicted to social media felt increased levels of self-alienation in comparison to little or underuse of social media. The finding of a significant correlation between self-alienation and media addiction suggests that there is a relationship between these two

factors. It may indicate that college students who experience self-alienation are more likely to engage in problematic media use, or that excessive media use contributes to feelings of self-alienation (Fardouly et al., 2018). However, it's important to note that correlation does not necessarily imply causation and that further research is necessary to better assess the causal relationship between the two variables.

Self-alienation is the state of mind where an individual feels disconnected from themselves, their emotions, and their surroundings. The study showed that it can result in feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Social media's addictive nature presents a barrier to college students as it is hard to disconnect from the online world (Fardouly et al., 2018). It creates an environment for individuals where they need to constantly curate "perfect images" of themselves and showcase their appearance (Kross et al., 2013). This has can create a false sense of reality. The curated images and posts that users see on social media may not reflect the reality of their lives. This can lead to a distorted perception of oneself and others, contributing to feelings of self-alienation and disconnection from reality (Kraut et al., 1998).

### **3.4 Depression and Worry**

In addition, increased social media usage showed significant similarity to depression and worry. Both variables had a strong relationship. These findings suggest that excessive media use may contribute to the development of depression and worry, as media use can increase feelings of social isolation and decrease face-to-face social interaction (Pantic, 2014). On the other hand, individuals who are already experiencing depression and worry may be more likely to turn to excessive media use as a form of coping or escape (Jeri-Yabar, 2019).

Depression is a complex and multifaceted mental health disorder that can have a profound impact on an individual's quality of life. In addition, worry refers to excessive,

uncontrollable, and persistent thoughts about negative events or experiences. This study revealed that self-alienation is strongly correlated to depression (path estimate 0.8972) and worry. Those who are severely depressed seem to be struggling to find meaning and purpose in life (Pantic, 2014). Social media's constant comparison and competition can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, leading to self-alienation (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckels, 2014). However, it is important to note that these findings do not imply causation between media addiction and depression/worry (Tandoc, 2015). Other factors may contribute to these findings and further research may need to be conducted in order to adequately assess the impact of social media addiction on students at Texas A&M University.

### **3.5 Free Will**

Based on the research, higher levels of media addiction suggest that respondents felt a significant decrease in their ability to possess free will (Pariser, 2011). Often discussed together, free will and existential psychology are two related concepts. As a branch of psychology, existentialism focuses on the broad nature of the human experience. How do we perceive the world? What unique struggles do we face as individuals and as a collective? Existential psychology emphasizes personal responsibility reflected in choice (Pariser, 2011). This field tends to integrate more humanistic approaches and techniques in both therapy and experimentation (Monterosso and Schwartz, 2020). In the context of social media, existential psychology can offer insights into how these platforms impact our sense of self and our relationship with the world. Social media can impact our sense of self by creating a culture in which we feel pressure to present a curated and idealized version of ourselves to the world (Black, 2019). This can create a sense of inauthenticity and disconnection from our true selves, which can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, and a lack of fulfillment (Manago, Taylor, and

Greenfield, 2008). Additionally, social media can also create a sense of existential angst by exposing us to a constant stream of information and opinions about the state of the world (Zucker, 2021). This can be overwhelming and can lead to a sense of helplessness or hopelessness about our ability to effect change.

In relation to existential psychology, free will is a subcategory that refers to the belief that individuals have the ability to make choices independently (Monterosso and Schwartz, 2020). Both recognize the meaning and purpose of life with the included sense of responsibility for the choices we make.

The relationship between free will and addiction is a complex one and has been the subject of much debate. Addiction is often characterized by a loss of control over the behavior and a continued engagement in the behavior despite negative consequences (Leshner, 1997). Some might even argue that addiction is a disease that alienates individuals' free will, while others argue that individuals with addiction are still capable of making choices and are responsible for their own actions (Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2017).

When looking through a medical lens, addiction is perceived as a disease that alters the brain and impairs an individual's ability to make healthy choices. Research suggests that addiction changes the way the brain processes rewards and motivations (Leshner, 1997). It makes it more difficult for individuals to resist engaging in addictive behaviors. This makes it hard for an individual to control their impulses and make healthy decisions. On the other hand, from a psychological standpoint, researchers argue that individuals with addiction are still capable of making choices and are responsible for their actions. They argue that addiction is a choice and that individuals can choose to seek help and overcome their addiction.

Although social media provides individuals with the ability to share and express information, images, videos, and thoughts freely, it can turn into an addiction. Social media provides users with a great degree of freedom. Who do they interact with, what platform they chose, how do they interact, and what information they are willing to share? However, social media challenges our perceptions of free will (Paulhus and Carey, 2009). Each platform is designed to persuade and engage the user for long periods of time. The algorithms used can influence the content that users see and the way the users interact with other online platforms and individuals. This can create a filter bubble that limits exposure to diverse perspectives and viewpoints, potentially narrowing one's ability to make informed decisions (Zucker, 2021). Social media can hinder the ability of the user to use free will to navigate the site. This can ultimately cause negative effects on the well-being of an individual (Hinsz, 1990).

Additionally, social media can also create a sense of social pressure and conformity, as users are incentivized to conform to popular opinions and behaviors to gain social approval and validation (Zucker, 2021). This can limit individuals' ability to express their true opinions and values freely. Moreover, social media can be addictive, and its constant stimulation can lead to impulsive decision-making and a lack of self-control. This can reduce individuals' ability to make deliberate and thoughtful choices.

Social media provides individuals with an unprecedented degree of autonomy and agency, as they can use these platforms to express themselves, connect with others, and share their ideas and beliefs with a global audience. Social media allows individuals to explore their passions, connect with like-minded individuals, and pursue their own unique goals and aspirations. It can also create a sense of pressure and conformity, as individuals may feel compelled to conform to the norms and expectations of their social media communities. Social

media can create a sense of groupthink, in which individuals adopt the beliefs and attitudes of their peers without fully considering their own personal values and preferences (Janis, 2007). This can limit their sense of free will and constrain their ability to make choices that truly reflect their own unique identity (Paulhus and Carey, 2009).

### **3.6 Authenticity**

Existential psychology places a high value on the concept of authenticity, which refers to the degree to which individuals are able to express their true selves and live in accordance with their own personal values and beliefs. Social media, however, can have a profound impact on one's sense of authenticity (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014).

On one hand, social media can provide individuals with a powerful platform for self-expression and authenticity. Social media allows individuals to share their unique perspectives and experiences with others, and to connect with like-minded individuals who share their values and passions. Social media can also provide individuals with an opportunity to explore and express their own sense of identity and purpose, which can promote a sense of authenticity and self-discovery (Marlow, 2021). These platforms can also create a sense of inauthenticity and disconnection, as individuals may feel pressure to present a highly curated and idealized version of themselves online (Sabato, 2019). Social media can create a "highlight reel" effect, in which individuals only share their most positive and impressive experiences while concealing their struggles and vulnerabilities. This can create a sense of pressure to conform to an idealized image of oneself, which can undermine one's sense of authenticity and create feelings of inadequacy or insecurity (Sabato, 2019).

The effects of social media on free will and authenticity have important implications for mental health. Research has shown that excessive social media use can be associated with a

range of negative outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness and isolation (Tandoc, 2015). From an existential psychology perspective, this may be because excessive social media use can undermine one's sense of free will and authenticity. When individuals feel pressure to conform to the norms and expectations of their social media communities or to present an idealized version of themselves online, they may feel a sense of disconnection from their true selves and their own personal values and beliefs. This can create a sense of internal conflict and dissonance, which can contribute to feelings of anxiety, depression, and existential despair.

Overall, social media can have both positive and negative effects on one's sense of free will and authenticity. While social media can provide individuals with a powerful platform for self-expression and connection, it can also create a sense of pressure and conformity and may undermine one's sense of authenticity and self-discovery. Understanding these effects is important for mental health professionals, as it can help them to develop interventions and strategies that promote a healthy society.

The divergent effects of social media challenge people's ability to maintain a sense of meaning in life. In turn, this addiction can reduce their quality of life, academic achievement, and physical health, and hinder their energy level (Andreassen et al., 2017). It is important to determine common determinants of the social media issue and prevent further worsened mental health issues.



#### **4. FUTURE DIRECTION AND LIMITATION**

There are several limitations in this study that cause it not to be not indicative of the rest of the population and not generalizable due to cross-cultural differences. First, the sample size was first-year psychology students at Texas A&M University. Although randomized, the survey was sent out to those who would receive credit per university guidelines.

The following was not a causal study because it does not fit under the aspects of a scientific experiment. In addition, biases may be related to those with a higher percentage of depression/worry. No additional information was collected to identify if social media was the true common denominator in mental health issues for the indicated sample size. This was because we did not collect if respondents had a diagnosed mental illness (i.e depression) prior to their initial use of social media. Therefore, we were unable to clarify whether these findings were truly unbiased against a population of students who had pre-existing conditions or were solely affected by the increased use of social media.

The survey lacks comparison to students outside of the first-year psychology 107 courses at Texas A&M University because it is not indicative of a timeline. Students were asked questions about their use of social media and its impact on their mental health. However, respondents were not asked when they began to use the indicated media platform. This could potentially lead to biases regarding the intensity of social media addiction. Respondents who indicated that they had low self-esteem, depression, and felt self-alienated could have been using social media platforms for longer periods of time (i.e years) versus those who may have downloaded the platforms recently versus those who have never used one.

The study relied on voluntary participation, which may have led to self-selection bias. Individuals who are more interested or concerned about media addiction, self-alienation, depression, and worry may be more likely to participate in the study, leading to the over-representation of these individuals in the sample (Simundić, 2013). Similarly, the study relied on self-reported measures to assess media addiction, self-alienation, depression, and worry. Self-reported measures can be subject to response biases, such as social desirability bias, which may affect the accuracy of the results.

As social media continues to play an increasingly important role today, we can look to further understand its impact on college students' mental health (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler Mukhopadhyay, and Scherlis, 1998). An interesting finding is a difference in media preoccupation versus media addiction. Further investigation could explore how other factors, such as long-term use through longitudinal studies could moderate or mediate the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes.

In addition, it would be interesting to conduct further studies on identifying correlations between variables. Future studies could investigate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing media addiction, self-alienation, depression, and worry among college students. Such interventions could include cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based interventions, or behavioral interventions to reduce media use (Hoffman and Gomez, 2017). Likewise, The current study focused on college students, specifically first-year psychology students at Texas A&M University. Future studies could investigate the relationship between media addiction, self-alienation, depression, and worry in different populations, such as higher student classifications, adolescents, adults, or elderly individuals.

Further research could explore interventions to reduce the negative effects of social media on college students. Students at Texas A&M University are offered a range of resources that provide mental health support and services such as individual counseling, group counseling, crisis intervention, and psychiatric services. This resource, also known as CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) can provide students with the resources to adequately assess and treat any conditions. Community resources are addressed to those who have the following clinical issues but are not limited to, a history of “chronic mental health, personality disorders, chronic suicidality, multiple psychiatry hospitalizations, active symptoms of psychosis;” while also offering their shared concern through unlimited group therapy and workshops to encourage a healthy relationship between the psychiatric provider and student (Scope of Practice, 2021). However, CAPS and other vital mental health programs around campus do not address the entire scope of the dilemma. Additional work is required to identify appropriate ways to implement and assess intervention methods.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present review findings suggest that students at Texas A&M University face increased feelings of self-alienation, depression, and worry when compared to social media addiction levels. Addiction can lead to a distorted sense of reality and emotional detachment (Boden. 2013). This can lead to individuals feeling disconnected from those around them, even when they are physically present, which can also contribute to feelings of self-alienation. However, there is little to no correlation between social media addiction and free will or social media preoccupation. Many individuals use social media frequently without being addicted and may simply be interested in activities beyond the reaches of the internet and social media. By being aware of the potential risks associated with social media addiction and its effects on self-alienation, individuals can maintain a healthy relationship with their mental well-being.

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## APPENDIX A: MEASURES

Descriptives

	Media_Addiction_Score	Media_Preoccupation_Score	Self_Alienation	Depression_Score	Worry_Score
N	283	281	288	282	287
Missing	10	12	5	11	6
Mean	20.9	18.7	12.2	10.5	9.25
Median	22.0	19.0	12.0	9.00	9
Standard deviation	6.45	4.54	5.81	8.45	3.31
Minimum	6.00	6.00	4.00	0.00	3
Maximum	41.0	30.0	28.0	40.0	15

*Table A.1: Descriptives*

Correlation Matrix

	Media_Addiction_Score	Media_Preoccupation_Score	Depression_Score	Worry_Score	Self_Alienation
Media_Addiction_Score	—				
Media_Preoccupation_Score	0.445 ***	—			
Depression_Score	0.195 **	0.093	—		
Worry_Score	0.237 ***	0.101	0.478 ***	—	
Self_Alienation	0.240 ***	0.173 **	0.625 ***	0.422 ***	—

Note. \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

*Table A.2: Correlation Matrix*

Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	p
Indirect	0.1913	0.0494	3.88	< .001
Direct	0.0628	0.0622	1.01	0.313
Total	0.2540	0.0767	3.31	< .001

*Table A.3: Mediation Estimates*

		Estimate	SE	Z	p
Media_Addiction_Score	→ Self_Alienation	0.2132	0.0525	4.06	< .001
Self_Alienation	→ Depression_Score	0.8972	0.0691	12.99	< .001
Media_Addiction_Score	→ Depression_Score	0.0628	0.0622	1.01	0.313

*Table A.4: Path Estimates*