

Social Media and Social Connection in Sexual and Gender Minority Young Adults

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Amaranta Ramirez¹ , David B. Rivera¹, and Alison Cerezo¹

Abstract

Sexual and gender minority (SGM) young adults spend more time on social media than their heterosexual peers. However, the link between social media and mental health is mixed. This study employed a mixed methods approach to explore the links between social media, social connectedness, and mental health symptoms among SGM young adults between 18 to 26 years old. Focus groups ($N = 14$) revealed how SGM emerging adults perceive social media as a place for socialization, building identity, and connecting to the larger SGM community. However, using social media as a primary way to seek social connections had drawbacks, such as consistent exposure to negative content. A series of multiple regressions ($N = 238$) further corroborated these findings, indicating that social connection played a role in reducing symptoms of depression for SGM young adults. Implications for social media development and clinicians working with SGM young adults are provided.

Keywords

sexual and gender minorities, social media, mental health, social support, social connection

¹Department of Counseling, Clinical and School Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Amaranta Ramirez, Graduate School of Psychology, California Lutheran University, 2201 Outlet Center Dr # 600, Oxnard, CA 93036, USA.

Email: amaranta@ucsb.edu

Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

This study takes a look at why LGBTQ+ youth and young adults use social media to find connection, support and community – and how it is related to their mental health. Findings suggest that having social connection on social media mitigates the effects of depression and anxiety, particularly among high users. These findings help us understand how to better use online spaces, and how they can be used to support mental health.

The advent of the internet has enabled connections beyond one's immediate social circles—a development especially valuable for marginalized groups (Gordon et al., 2023). For sexual and gender minority (SGM), digital spaces such as social media offer opportunities to express their identities openly, seek social support, and build community (Berger et al., 2022; Cerezo et al., 2021; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Herrmann, Bindt et al., 2024). Given the rejection, microaggressions, and homophobia encountered in offline environments (Lyonga, 2021; Puckett et al., 2015; Seelman et al., 2017), social media has become a critical venue for SGMs to find and form supportive communities.

Early studies noted that SGMs used online spaces to explore sexual identity anonymously (Shaw, 1997). Today, platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube have evolved into SGM-friendly environments that feature tailored content and creators (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Bond et al., 2008; Floegel, 2020; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Social media allows individuals to experiment with their identity, “come out” at their own pace (Fox & Ralston, 2016), and form meaningful relationships—evidenced by findings that SGMs are more likely than their heterosexual peers to have online friends and at least one close online connection (Hillier et al., 2012; Ybarra et al., 2015a). Moreover, 62% of LGBTQ+ youth use the internet specifically to connect with peers, especially when offline support (e.g., Gay Straight Alliances) is lacking (DeHaan et al., 2013; GLSEN, 2013). Notably, the odds of suicide are 20% lower for SGM youth and emerging adults who feel safe online (Trever Project, 2023).

Unlike in-person interactions, social media preserves anonymity, accessibility, safety, and synchronous communication (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). This makes it imperative for the field of counseling psychology to explore innovative support methods for SGM youth—especially amid increasing anti-SGM legislation and violence linked to higher suicide rates (Simmons-Duffin, 2024; Society of Counseling Psychology, 2023). Accordingly, this study advocates for alternative supports that foster online community and belonging when offline environments are hostile (Malik et al., 2023; Moagi et al., 2021). Given that research on SGM social media usage is

still emerging, up-to-date data is needed to inform clinical and research directions.

A Multi-Framework Approach

The social media contextual framework (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015) highlights how platform features—such as anonymity and accessibility—enable SGMs to safely express themselves and expand their networks, particularly in rural or conservative areas (Escobar-Viera et al., 2022). Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) further explains how both *proximal stressors* (e.g., internalized homophobia) and *distal stressors* (e.g., systemic discrimination) adversely affect SGM health. Although much research has focused on offline minority stress (Corte et al., 2016; Dyar et al., 2020; Meyer & Frost, 2013; Watson et al., 2019), online discrimination—including harassment and cyberbullying—can compound these effects. Yet, engaging in affirming online spaces may mitigate mental health symptoms.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) further suggests that group membership and social connections are central to one's self-concept and sense of belonging. For many SGMs—especially those with limited offline opportunities—social media plays a vital role in fostering community and buffering against minority stress. Indeed, research consistently shows that robust social support and positive online relationships enhance resilience, alleviate depression, improve overall well-being, and reduce loneliness among SGMs (Berger et al., 2022; Cauberghe et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2017; DiFulvio, 2011; Herek & Gamets, 2007; Ryan et al., 2010). Nonetheless, SGMs continue to face disparities in accessing supportive environments relative to heterosexual peers (Escobar-Viera et al., 2022). In contrast, problematic internet use has been associated with increased depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, especially when involving multiple platforms and cyberaggression (Cai et al., 2023; Jasso-Medrano & López-Rosales, 2018; Karim et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2022; Vannucci et al., 2017). Although high usage—averaging 5 hours a day among SGMs (Trevor Project, 2023)—may contribute to stress and psychiatric symptoms (Faucher et al., 2014; Schnek & Fremouw, 2012; Shannon et al., 2022), the positive effects of online social support remain significant (Berger et al., 2022; Fox & Ralston, 2016). The American Psychological Association (2023) notes that social media's impact is moderated by individual factors. Reviews have also linked cyberbullying with heightened depression and suicidality among SGMs (Herrmann, Barkmann et al., 2024).

Study Purpose

Given the limited research on social connection, social media use, and mental health among SGM young adults, our mixed-methods sequential exploratory

study addresses three questions: (a) How do SGM young adults perceive social media for socialization? (b) How does social media impact their mental health? (c) What are the cross-sectional pathways linking mental health, social media use, outness, online social connection, and community? Based on qualitative findings, multiple regressions with 238 participants tested the hypotheses that social media use is positively associated with depression and anxiety (Cai et al., 2023; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Karim et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2022), that social connection is negatively associated with these symptoms (Brusilovskiy et al., 2016; Santini et al., 2015), and that outness, community, and integrated social media use are positively linked to social connectedness (Russell & Fish, 2016).

Second, based on findings in the qualitative portion of the study, a series of multiple regressions with 238 participants were tested to explore the relationship between mental health, social media use, and social connection online. Specifically, it was hypothesized that there would be a positive association between social media use and symptoms of depression and anxiety, a consistent finding in the research (Cai et al., 2023; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Karim et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2022; Vannucci et al., 2017). Second, it was hypothesized that social connection would be negatively associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Brusilovskiy et al., 2016; Santini et al., 2015). Finally, it was hypothesized that outness, community, and integration of social media into social routine would be positively associated with social connectedness (Russell & Fish, 2016).

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-method design. In the first phase, focus group interviews were used to explore the lived experiences of SGM young adults on social media. An interview protocol—developed by the first author based on the literature (Cerezo et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016) and personal experience within the SGM community—guided the discussions. The resulting qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Three coders participated: Coder 1, a cisgender Mexican American lesbian woman; Coder 2, a cisgender Mexican-American gay man; and Coder 3, a Mexican-American cisgender heterosexual woman. Coders 1 and 2, who are part of the target population (with Coder 1 frequently engaging in queer social media spaces), provided insider perspectives, whereas Coder 3 offered an external viewpoint as a woman of Color.

In the second phase, an online survey was developed based on themes uncovered in the focus groups to examine relationships among social media

use, social connection, and mental health among young adult SGMs. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess how these individuals (a) interact with social media, (b) seek social connection with other SGMs, and (c) are affected mentally by their online experiences.

Recruitment

For the qualitative phase, purposive homogeneous sampling was used (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were recruited via posts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit that detailed the inclusion criteria, compensation (\$10), and a screening survey link. Those meeting the criteria were contacted by email and further screened by phone to confirm U.S. residency and the accuracy of their survey responses before being scheduled for a focus group. The inclusion criteria were: identification as part of the SGM community, emerging adulthood (ages 18–26 years), and spending more than 3 hours per day on social media.

Recruitment for the quantitative phase followed a similar approach, with the online survey advertised on social media. The same inclusion criteria applied, and participants who completed the survey were entered into a raffle to win \$25.

Participants and Data Cleaning

Qualitative. Of the 57 participants who completed the screening survey, 43 were excluded (e.g., due to age, non-U.S. residency, or non-responsiveness), leaving a final sample of 14 SGM young adults. Participant's self-reported sexual orientations were gay and lesbian ($n = 5$), bisexual ($n = 6$), and pansexual ($n = 3$). Ten identified as cisgender and four as non-binary. Most participants were White ($n = 8$), with the remainder identifying as African American ($n = 3$), Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 2$), and Asian American ($n = 1$); the average age was 20 years old.

Quantitative. Out of the 553 initial survey respondents, the final sample included 238 SGM young adults who met the inclusion criteria, completed at least 95% of the survey, and were not flagged as false respondents. As discussed in more detail in the Procedures section, false respondents were identified based on factors such as survey completion in under 5 minutes, multiple submissions, or invalid responses. The average completion time was 29 minutes (median = 11). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 22$; 7.6%); the majority identified as White (65%), cisgender (60.5%), and bisexual (33.6%), with 55.9% reporting 3–4 hours of daily social media use (see Table 1 for details).

Procedures

Data Cleaning. Participants for both phases were recruited online. Due to the risk of bots infiltrating online surveys, we applied a bot detection methodology (Ramirez et al., 2023; Shaw et al., 2023). This approach included: using open-ended questions (e.g., for occupation) to identify repetitive, identical responses; analyzing speeders and straight-liners (Zhang & Conrad, 2014) to flag respondents who completed the survey in under 5 minutes (based on pilot tests where the minimum completion time was 8 minutes); detecting multiple submissions from the same IP address; embedding slider questions to require physical input; identifying suspicious email patterns (e.g., emails beginning with a first name, last name, or a string of three or more numbers using @gmail or @yahoo). Respondents exhibiting any of these indicators or who did not meet the inclusion criteria—identifying as SGMs, being 18 to 26 years old, and spending at least 3 hours online per day—were excluded from the final sample. Finally, the survey allowed participants to freely describe their occupation. Responses that repeatedly listed the same occupation (e.g., “Marketing Director” three or more times) were flagged. Such entries were reviewed and respondents who finished the survey in under 5 minutes, shared repeated IP addresses, exhibited suspicious email patterns, failed or skipped slider questions, or provided identical answers across Likert items were

Table 1. Demographics of Quantitative Study

Variable							
Gender	%	Race	%	Sexual orientation	%	Social Media	%
<i>n</i>	238	<i>n</i>	237	<i>n</i>	238	<i>n</i>	238
Cis woman	30.6	African American	9.2	Lesbian/Gay	26.5	Facebook	48.3
Cis man	29.8	Latinx/Hispanic	8.8	Bisexual	33.6	Instagram	56.3
Trans woman	11.3	Asian American	10.1	Pansexual	11.3	Twitter	65.1
Trans man	3.7	White/Caucasian	65.0	Queer	16.8	Snapchat	33.6
Non-binary	18.1	Other	6.7	Asexual	7.1	Discord	50.0
Other	6.3			Other	4.6	TikTok	31.9
						Reddit	63.9
						YouTube	72.3

**p* < .05.
***p* < .01.

removed. In addition, individuals who did not identify as SGMs, were not aged 18–26 years, or spent less than 3 hours online per day were excluded.

Qualitative Data: Interviews. Eligible participants were invited to a Zoom focus group after signing a consent form. Four semi-structured focus groups, each with three to four participants, were conducted by the first author. Sessions lasted 45–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants received a demographic questionnaire and a list of SGM mental health resources postsession.

Quantitative Data: Survey. The second phase involved a survey designed based on themes from the focus groups. It assessed social media experiences, including social connection, platform influence, daily integration, mental health, community, and identity. Three key themes emerged. Social Connection was measured by the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS; Lee & Robbins, 1995), the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS; Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), and the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM; Riggle et al., 2014). Mental Health was assessed using the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Zsido et al., 2020) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised-10 (CESD-10; Björgvinsson et al., 2013). Social Media was represented by the Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMUIS; Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013; Maree, 2017) and a single measure of time spent online.

Measures. In addition to demographics, measures included in the online survey were considered appropriate for use with an adult population (Björgvinsson et al., 2013; Mohebbi et al., 2018; Spielberger, 1983; Thomas & Cassidy, 2021; Zsido et al., 2020) and for SGMs (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Riggle et al., 2014). Of the scales that were not deliberately created with SGM samples in mind, the SCS has been validated in international adult samples (Capanna et al., 2013; Moran et al., 2022) and used in adult samples (Satici et al., 2016), transgender youth populations (Tüzün et al., 2022), and LGBTQ+ populations (Bond & Miller, 2021; Detrie & Lease, 2007). The STAI-5 was developed by Zsido et al.'s (2020) as a valid short-form of the 40-item version (Spielberger et al., 1970). The STAI-5 has been used in adult populations (Zhu & Deng, 2023) and validated in international populations (Pretorius & Padmanabhanunni, 2023). The CESD-10 has been validated in adolescents, psychiatric samples, international populations, and has been widely administered to LGBTQ+ populations (Baron et al., 2017; Björgvinsson et al., 2013; Bradley et al., 2010; Cerecero-Garcia et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2019; Kneale & Bécares, 2021). Finally, the SMUIS has been validated in U.S. university undergraduates (Sigerson & Cheng, 2018), international populations (Athar & Jazi, 2021), and has been used with

LGBTQ+ samples (Chan, 2023) and adult populations to address mental health (Fathadhika et al., 2019; Kocakaya & Arslan, 2023).

Social Connection. Feelings of social connection were measured through the SCS (Lee & Robbins, 1995), an 8-item scale that assesses feelings of connection to society, people, friends, and family. Example items include, “I feel disconnected from the world around me” and “I have no sense of togetherness with my peers.” Items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*). Items rated higher on the scale indicate stronger social attachment.

The SCS demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$) and strong test–retest reliability over a 2-week period ($r = .96$) in its initial validation study (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis in the original study (Lee & Robbins, 1995) supported the scale’s construct validity, with the incremental fit index exceeding .90, indicating an appropriate model fit. Internal consistency remained high ($\alpha = .89$) in the present study, demonstrating good reliability within this sample.

Social Media Use Integration. The SMUIS (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013; Maree, 2017) measures the extent to which social media use is integrated into individuals’ social routines and emotional connections. It is a 10-item inventory with two subscales: (a) Social Integration and Emotional Connection ($\alpha = .70$) and (b) Integration Into Social Routine ($\alpha = .59$). Example questions include, “Using social media is part of my everyday routine” and “I prefer to communicate with others mainly through social media.” Items used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The SMUIS demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$) and strong test–retest reliability over the span of 3 weeks ($r = .80$) in its initial validation study (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013). A subsequent validation study by Maree (2017) also demonstrated strong internal consistency for the full scale ($\alpha = .89$). The SMUIS demonstrated strong convergent validity, as evidenced by a strong association with the Facebook Use Intensity Scale ($r = .77$) which is a related yet distinct measure (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013). Internal consistency remained acceptable ($\alpha = .77$) in the present study, demonstrating appropriate reliability within this sample.

Depression. Symptoms of depression were measured using the 10-item CESD-10 (Andresen et al., 1994; Björngvinsson et al., 2013) which uses the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5th Edition (DSM-V; American Psychological Association, 2013) criterion described for major depressive disorder. Sample items include, “I could not get going” and “I felt depressed.” Items were rated using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 3 (*all of the time*).

The CESD-10 demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$) among a clinical sample (Björgvinsson et al., 2013). To add, this measure of depression has demonstrated strong test–retest reliability over a 12-month period ($r = .59$) in its initial validation study (Andresen et al., 1994). The CESD-10 has demonstrated strong convergent validity, as evidenced by a strong association with the Depression and Functioning subscale of the Behavior and Symptom Identification Scale ($r = .86$), which is a related yet distinct measure (Björgvinsson et al., 2013). Internal consistency remained high ($\alpha = .84$) in the present study, demonstrating good reliability within this sample.

Anxiety. Symptoms of anxiety were measured using the State subscale of the STAI-5 (Zsido et al., 2020), which measures nondisorder specific state anxiety. The State subscale consists of five items measuring state anxiety. Sample items include, “I feel nervous” and “I feel that difficulties are piling up so that I cannot overcome them.” The STAI-5 uses a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much so*).

The State subscale demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$) in its initial validation study (Zsido et al., 2020). The State subscale demonstrated a moderate bivariate association ($r = .51$) with the Beck Depression Inventory, suggesting adequate convergent validity (Zsido et al., 2020). Internal consistency for the State subscale remained high ($\alpha = .86$) in the present study, demonstrating good reliability within this sample.

Time Spent Online. Time spent online was measured by a question constructed by the researchers, “On a typical day, how much time do you spend on social media?” Participants indicated on average how long they felt they spent on social media in hours. Responses ranged from “30 minutes to an hour” to “7 hours or more”.

Sexual and Gender Minority Community. Feelings of connection to the LGBTQ+ community was measured through the 5-item Belonging to the LGBT Community subscale of the LGB-PIM (Riggle et al., 2014). Example items are, “I feel supported by the LGBT community” and “I feel a connection to the LGBT community.” Items are measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

The LGBT Community subscale demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$) and strong test–retest reliability over a 6-week period ($r = .84$) in its initial validation study (Riggle et al., 2014). The LGBTQ Community subscale demonstrated strong convergent validity, as evidenced by a strong association ($r = .56$) with a LGBT-tailored version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Riggle et al., 2014). Internal consistency remained high ($\alpha = .88$) in the present study, demonstrating good reliability within this sample.

Outness and Identity. Participant's outness about their SGM identity was measured through the 5-item Disclosure subscale of the NOS (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014), which measures the level of "disclosure" in different social settings and with different social groups. The subscale poses the question, "What percentage of the people in this group do you think are aware of your sexual orientation?", and is followed by a list of social groups, including family members, friends and acquaintances, and strangers. Responses are recorded through a percentage scale ranging from 0% to 100%.

The Disclosure subscale demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$) in the initial validation study (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). The Disclosure subscale further demonstrated strong convergent validity, as evidenced by a strong association ($r = .83$) with the Outness Inventory (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014). Internal consistency remained acceptable ($\alpha = .75$) in the present study, demonstrating adequate reliability within this sample.

Data Analysis

Qualitative. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the four focus group transcripts. Three research team members—two doctoral student researchers from the SGM community and one community research associate—independently reviewed the transcripts. Using open coding (Khandkar, 2009), we developed and refined codes representing recurring themes. Each team member initially generated 10 to 20 codes per transcript and identified three to five representative quotes.

Following coding, the team convened to discuss and refine codes. The first meeting focused on reviewing initial codes and identifying patterns. In the second meeting, emerging patterns led to the consolidation of certain codes into potential themes. The third meeting centered on defining distinct themes and selecting supporting quotes. Codes were merged based on similarities through team consensus. This process resulted in three overarching themes and 10 subthemes, condensed from the original 112 codes. The subthemes were grouped into overarching themes based on their connections (e.g., the social connection theme encompassed community, identity, and representation, as all reflected aspects of interpersonal connection).

Quantitative

Preliminary Analysis. Data were screened for normality. Values between -2.0 and 2.0 were considered acceptable for skewness, while values between -7.0 and 7.0 suggested normality for kurtosis (Curran et al., 1996; George & Mallery, 1996). Across variables, less than .01% of data were missing and any missing data were considered missing at random.

Regression Analysis

Three multiple regressions were conducted using SPSS 28 to test the hypotheses. Analyses included the SCS, SMUIS Scale, CESD-10, STAI-5, LGB-PIM, NOS scales, and time spent online. Assumptions were thoroughly assessed to validate the predictive integrity of the model. Scatter plot analyses confirmed linearity between the predictor and dependent variables. The Durbin-Watson test (1.80) ruled out autocorrelation. A Shapiro-Wilk test indicated normality of residuals ($W = .994, p = .42$). Homoscedasticity was verified via scatter plot analysis of standardized residuals and predicted values, demonstrating uniform variance. Lastly, multicollinearity was evaluated through the variance inflation factor (VIF), with all values below the threshold of 5, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Kim, 2019).

Results

Qualitative Analysis

Results from the first phase underscored the mixed experiences SGM young adults have on social media in terms of their mental health and finding social connection. Three main themes with 10 subthemes emerged from the interviews and represented recurring narratives. Names given are pseudonyms.

Themes

Social Connection

Community. Participants highlighted the versatility of social media as a platform for social connection. For most of the sample, social connection through social media meant access to the larger SGM community to build SGM friendships when they were not accessible offline.

I know so many more gays online than I do in real life. That's really just the great thing. 'Cuz like I'm an artist, all my friends are gay artists and gay cosplayers and queer film makers. And it's wonderful! And then I go to work, and I'm surrounded by straight people. (Lynn, 22, woman)

Further, without access to social media, participants often felt isolated: "There's nowhere else I can really go. 'Cause it's either social media or I'm by myself with nothing to do in my house and just have my thoughts" (Layla, 26, woman). Social media also allowed for participants to learn about the SGM community where they might have otherwise not had: "I learned way more about the community at large on social media than in, like, real life and like

school and stuff (laughs). It's really educational if you know where to look" (Luke, 23, man).

Participants shared how finding community on social media bolstered feelings of belonging and mitigated loneliness in addition to providing sexuality and gender affirming experiences for more geographically isolated participants.

But yeah, I would say the big benefit is being able to talk to people, being able to have that part of yourself, that you're like, yeah, this is ok, other people are like this, I don't have to push this down or resist this part of myself, this is totally normal. Especially if you're like me and live in basically a third-world country (Shawn, 20, man)

Identity. Identity development was a salient topic as participants recalled their earlier social media experiences. For most, social media provided a safe space for exploration of their sexuality and answered questions about themselves that they didn't feel safe asking family or teachers about.

I would say social media was key to me as the link to who I was... 'cuz I've grown up in a household that is very unallowed ... thing to be part of the community. As I started to become more aware of it, obviously my results with stuff like Instagram was a slow curation that helped me see "Ok! This is acceptable" and yeah, helped me come to accept it. (Shawn, 20, man)

I'm the oldest in my family. I have two younger siblings, so it's not like I felt like I knew anyone that I was able to ask, in like ... real life that I knew. So, using the internet and social media as ways to answer my own questions. (Lynn, 22, woman)

Participants also discussed what it meant to be queer online and the responsibilities that came with the "politicization" of their identities.

Especially as a queer woman, I have to step up and be social and politically active, because I already represent, to bring it back to everything we talked about earlier, my identity has already been politicized so I might as well be politically active, so everything I see I carry with me. (Jessie, 20, woman)

Representation. Participants emphasized the importance of seeing themselves represented on social media, particularly given the politicization of their identities. This was especially relevant for marginalized groups within the SGM community, including non-binary and transgender individuals.

I'm very happy about representation ... trans or non-binary people, any type of representation we get, I don't know, it's hard to be positive when everybody

forgets that you exist or doesn't acknowledge that people like you exist or are just like ... this is enough, but you haven't gotten like any representation. (Jordan, 24, non-binary)

Mental Health

Social Comparison. Social media's connection to mental health was mixed, with participants highlighting the varied experiences that ranged from positive to potentially detrimental. A frequently espoused sentiment was the inevitable social comparison to friends and strangers on social media. Although the reason for comparison was individual and personal, nonetheless the effect on their mental health was similar, with most participants noting an increase in symptoms of anxiety.

I'm a person that gets jealous very easily so whether it's my friends getting more of interaction on Twitter, on Instagram, or whatever, I can't help but compare myself to that, or I get jealous and start feeling bad and just kind of think to myself, "Well ... why are they talking to so and so and not me," we haven't spoken all day or something. It just starts to become things like that and in terms of the content I'm seeing, it also really annoys me. (Layla, 26, woman)

I'm seeing so many people getting jobs and then all of this stuff and I'm like, "Wow, I'm just sitting at home, anxious in bed." That was something I had to work on. That was one of the negative things, just feeling like I'm not caught up to everyone. I don't know, people put up the good stuff on social media, you don't know what's going on the other side. (Bella, 19, woman)

Most participants noted that others often only upload positive aspects of their lives, and that they are not privy to their personal struggles. However, despite this awareness, it did little to stop the feeling.

Negative Experiences Online. Negative experiences involved unpleasant social interactions and engaging with negatively charged content, including homophobic and racist encounters.

It's really unproductive when you put your energy to something or someone, that they won't change their mind, like say you maybe come across someone who is homophobic and you try to have a debate with them or something ... not debate, like have a conversation, and then it would turn into a debate is what I meant. Y'know, that's a way that is not useful for time and energy, but sometimes it's very easy to fall into that hole of getting into it. (Lynn, 22, woman)

Some negative experiences online that contributed to participants' distress were connected to their offline life. In some cases, this was *FOMO* (a fear of missing out), "It's the same thing with Snapchat, I deleted last year ... um ... was again it started to become something where it was more harm than good, with like FOMO, of missing out on things and stuff like that" (Shai, 20, woman). In other cases, it was fear about outing themselves.

With something like Instagram, which just feels too much pressure, like okay, I gotta be very careful with what I post here, because if I post the wrong thing this could be pulled up in a job interview. This could get seen by my family, this could do all this bad stuff to my life. (Janelle, 20, woman)

World Events. The present study gathered data between November 2020 and March 2021, a tumultuous time in the United States and around the world. Given the continued threat of COVID-19, the January 6th Insurrection, and the follow-up of the George Floyd protests, many of the participants endorsed stress and anxiety regarding the instability of their environment and the constant bombardment of negative information on social media.

Since I have anxiety and deal a lot with anxiety, I use social media to get away from ... I have social anxiety. I use social media a lot to get away from things like the outside, or just ignore what's happening outside. But it's kind of hard to ignore what's going on outside when everybody wants you to be so conscious about what is happening ... outside. (Lynn, 22, woman)

It's not like I wanted to ignore or anything but to me, social media is a means of escape. So, I don't want to go from having to deal with real stuff to having to ... go on social media and have people say, "Oh, if you're trying to ignore, or not being an active participant, you're a bad person." There was a lot of that going on around that time and it was just unbelievable. (Jordan, 24, non-binary)

Often, these sentiments were entangled between the negative experiences, FOMO and social comparisons that they endorsed, which spoke to the importance of their outside environment affecting their online experience and influencing their psychological well-being.

Support. Although there were adverse experiences on social media, participants were quick to highlight the beneficial aspects to participating on these platforms. In particular, they reported positive outcomes in regard to connecting and socializing, expanding past their SGM identity. Given the participants' experiences with depression and anxiety, some endorsed using social media as a way to connect to others when they were struggling with their mental health. However, what it meant to "reach out" varied across

individuals. For one, it was the parasocial-type relationship with streamers who spoke about mental health, “On social media too, people present like, the best parts of their days, if not their bad parts but a lot of the times seeing that type of stuff can be inspiring sometimes in some ways” (Luke, 23, man). For others it was direct interaction. “I would say that at least for me, personally, the most beneficial thing from social media, I’d say, is being able to have connections and fun people to talk to and everything because of my struggles with depression” (Layla, 26, woman).

In addition to connection, participants recounted their use of social media as an escape from feelings of anxiety and depression, often using these platforms as entertainment in the form of favorite artists, or videos. “If I’m ever feeling down, I watch bookmarked videos that I love, or go onto my fav peoples’ Twitter. Send my friends funny things. My mental health does affect how I interact with media” (Lynn, 22, woman).

Social Media

Platform Usage. Social Media as a theme encompassed feelings specific to the content and platforms participants interacted with and how they navigated these spaces. Often, participants were very clear about the different platforms and what they used them for. Discord and Reddit, for example, were regularly used given the relative feeling of safety and freedom of expression. However, many participants noted that certain platforms tended to be hostile towards SGM individuals. One participant noted that Facebook was a relatively toxic place, “With my family, I see a lot of negativity. And ... I don’t like going on Facebook, ‘cuz it’s just not a good space.” (Sergio, 24, man). Another participant echoed the sentiment, “at least for me, I actually have family members and other people on Facebook where I’m not comfortable sharing, like y’know, LGBTQ related stuff.” (Nicky, 24, non-binary). Finally, one participant reported that they didn’t feel connected to Facebook as it had nothing to do with the SGM community, “I have a Facebook, but I don’t really use it. There’s like nothing ... really on Facebook that I’m involved in that has really anything to do with the community.” (Lynn, 22, woman). As such, the environment curated by certain platforms played a significant role in its use. Platforms that allowed for curation were more likely to be considered queer friendly.

Curation. Given the mixed experiences on social media platforms, participants often spoke about coping mechanisms to deal with the content that they came across. One of the most common tactics was curation of their timelines. Participants reported various strategies that allowed them to control the type of content they encountered, including muting words, use of the block button, not following big accounts, as well as the differentiation of private and public accounts. “I’ve personally curated my different Twitter accounts. Be it

professional, personal, private ... either more heterosexual versus queer aligned spaces, just because of who I follow when I'm my authentic self, versus who I follow when I'm my professional self" (Lynn, 22, woman). Other strategies used to curate and control the content participants came across included limited use of apps, and physically limiting their access to their devices.

I scroll through the same three apps. If I don't like what's on one of them, I will switch. I'll stay on the same app for like a month and then I'll be like, "I'm tired of this" and then I'll go to the next one. (Shawn, 20, man)

The Internet is Very Heterosexual. Interestingly, participants also reported their experiences on social media platforms to be very oriented toward heterosexual individuals. Despite curation and seeking out queer friends and the SGM community, participants felt that platforms tended to cater to heterosexual people, feeling unwelcome as a result. "Depending on the platform you feel more excluded and more in the corner rather than being a part of the community and feeling welcomed than enjoying the content." (Lynn, 22, woman).

I find that there's a spectrum of social media, where some are very ... kind of integrated where everyone is in the same big mesh, like Tiktok or YouTube. And those tend to be heterosexually dominated, as real life tends to be. (Bella, 19, woman)

Quantitative Analysis

Regression analyses revealed that social connection, outness, LGBTQ+ community connection, and time spent online significantly impacted depression and anxiety symptoms (CESD-10, STAI-5). A multiple regression examined the effects of LGBTQ+ community connection, outness, social media integration, time spent online, depression, and anxiety on social connection. The model was significant ($F[6, 221] = 23.34, p < .001, R^2 = .38$), explaining 38% of the variance in social connection. Significant predictors included outness ($p = .009, \beta = .14$), social media integration ($p = .03, \beta = .12$), and depression ($p < .001, \beta = -.45$). Greater outness and social media integration increased social connection, whereas higher depression levels decreased it. Another multiple regression assessed the relationship between depression, social connection, and time spent online. The model was significant ($F[2, 228] = 59.26, p < .001, R^2 = .33$), explaining 33% of the variance in depression. A decrease in social connection corresponded to a .55-point increase in depression, whereas an increase in time spent online was associated with a .14-point rise in depression. A final regression examined anxiety,

social connection, and time spent online. The model was significant ($F[2, 232] = 30.75, p < .001, R^2 = .21$), explaining 21% of anxiety variance. A decrease in social connection was linked to a .42-point increase in anxiety, whereas increased time online correlated with a .12-point rise in anxiety. Regression coefficients are detailed in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#).

Discussion

Findings highlight the complex relationship between social media use and mental health among SGM young adults. Regression analyses showed that social connection mitigated the effects of time spent online on depression and anxiety, particularly among frequent users. This aligns with research showing that SGM youth use social media more often than heterosexual peers (GLSEN, 2013; Trevor Project, 2023) and that social media’s impact depends on how it is used (Cai et al., 2023; Shannon et al., 2022). Intentional, socially driven use appears protective, whereas passive use can contribute to negative outcomes (Clark et al., 2017).

Social connection was associated with lower depression and anxiety, supporting prior findings that online social engagement benefits SGM mental health (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2019). However, participants also noted social media’s potential to amplify minority stress, particularly through exposure to discrimination and cyberbullying (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Berger et al., 2021; Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). Consistent with Meyer and Frost (2013), the presence of supportive communities buffered these stressors, demonstrating how online spaces can serve as both sources of stress and resilience.

Table 2. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Social Connection

Variable	Social connection		
	B	SE B	β
LGBTQ Community	0.13	0.07	.10
Outness	0.10	0.04	.14**
Time spent online	−0.27	0.38	−.04
Integration of social media	0.42	0.19	.12*
Depression	−0.61	0.10	−.45**
Anxiety	−0.21	0.16	−.09
Constant	30.35	6.9	
R ²	0.388		
F	23.34		

Table 3. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Depression and Anxiety

Variable	Depression			Anxiety		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Time spent online	0.70	0.26	.14**	0.38	.18	.12*
Social connection	−0.40	0.04	−.54**	−0.19	.02	−.42**
Constant	10.76	5.1		8.9	3.5	
<i>R</i> ²	0.34			0.21		
<i>F</i>	59.26			30.75		

p* < .05.*p* < .01.

Findings aligned with the social media contextual framework (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015), emphasizing the role of anonymity and asynchronicity in fostering safe disclosure and community building (Berger et al., 2022; Roberts & Christens, 2021). Connection to the SGM community significantly enhanced social connection (Frost & Meyer, 2012), as did integrating social media into daily routines (Köbler et al., 2010). These findings align with the American Psychiatric Association's recommendations for positive social media use (Reynolds, 2023), suggesting that curating online interactions can mitigate negative effects.

Although social media may benefit all users (Rao et al., 2022), SGM youth rely on digital spaces for support more than their heterosexual peers due to unsupportive offline environments (Hillier et al., 2012; Ybarra et al., 2015b). This reliance increases their exposure to risks such as cyberbullying and discrimination but also provides critical avenues for identity exploration and socialization (Riggle et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2010; Su et al., 2016).

Overall, participants acknowledged social media's dual nature—both increasing stress and providing vital community support. The ability to find acceptance and identity affirmation online underscores its significance for SGM youth. These findings suggest that although social media can pose risks, its role in fostering social connection is essential for mental well-being.

Implications and Recommendations

This study reinforces that social media's impact on mental health is not linear, with variables such as social connection mediating its effects (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2019). Individual differences and social context must be considered in understanding these effects. Intentional social use, rather than passive engagement like “social snacking” (Clark et al.,

2017), may mitigate negative mental health outcomes and reduce loneliness (DeLonga et al., 2011).

For SGM individuals lacking acceptance in offline environments, social media can serve as a vital source of support. Mental health professionals can help clients leverage online resources, such as SGM-affirming groups and third spaces, to expand social networks. Finding affirming online communities fosters resilience (Bond et al., 2008; Hillier et al., 2012; Hillier & Harrison, 2007) and buffers against the negative effects of marginalization, particularly for those in hostile or rural environments.

Findings also suggest that social media use for community-building can protect against negative mental health effects. Mindful engagement—focusing on socialization rather than passive consumption—may help improve mood and reduce anxiety and depression. Encouraging positive social interactions online could be an effective strategy for supporting SGM youth navigating challenging offline environments.

Future Directions

Given the exploratory nature of this study, future research should build upon these findings by increasing sample sizes and utilizing alternative measures of depression and social media use. Although this study focused on emerging adults, future research should examine younger SGM individuals, as teenagers are significant social media users (Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, redefining social media use beyond platform count and time spent online may yield deeper insights into its relationship with social connection and mental health. Incorporating new psychometric measures (Craig et al., 2021) could further enhance accuracy. Finally, considering the rise in anti-SGM legislation (Bailey, 2022) and increasing violence against transgender individuals (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2023), future studies should differentiate between cisgender and transgender social media users to better understand their experiences and mental health outcomes.

Authors Note

Amaranta Ramirez, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, University of California is now at the Graduate School of Psychology at California Lutheran University. This project did not receive any specific grant or funding. Correspondence regarding this article should be forwarded to amyramirez@callutheran.edu

ORCID iD

Amaranta Ramirez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7575-1269>

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Author Biographies

Amaranta Ramirez, PhD, is an assistant professor of clinical psychology at California Lutheran University. Her research interests focuses on reducing mental health disparities for LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups through using social media and technology to access therapy, services, and resources.

David B. Rivera, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the counseling, clinical, and school psychology program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research interests are in addressing sexual and gender minority health disparities with a growing emphasis on the intersection between health and tech.

Dr. Alison Cerezo, PhD, is an associate researcher at the Univeristy of California Santa Barbara with affiliation to the Department of Clinical, Counseling Psychology. Their primary work is in the role of senior vice president of research at mpathic, a leading conversational intelligence company in healthcare and life sciences.