BSc Psychology

Social Media Use and its Connection to Anxiety and Gender

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SOCIAL MEDIA, ANXIETY AND GENDER

Foreword

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree, Reykjavik University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.
Abstract

In recent years the use of social media has grown substantially among young people. At the same time research has shown that occurrence of anxiety has also increased, especially among young girls. The aim of this study was to look at whether increased use of social media has an effect on increased reported anxiety among young people and if there was any difference between genders.

The data used in this study came from a study that was commissioned by The Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) which gave a questionnaire to students in 8th to 10th grades in Iceland. The results show that girls spend more time on social media than boys and their anxiety levels are also higher. That can be an indication that time spent on social media has a direct increasing effect on anxiety, more with girls than boys.

Keywords: social media, anxiety, gender differences.

Útdráttur

Undanfarin ár hefur notkun samfélagsmiðla aukist mikið meðal ungs fólks. Á sama tíma hafa rannsóknir sýnt að kvíði fer vaxandi, einkum hjá ungum stúlkum. Markmið þessarar rannsóknar er að kanna hvort aukin notkun samfélagsmiðla hefur áhrif á aukningu kviðatilfella hjá ungu fólki og hvor munur væri á kynjum.
Social Media Use and its Connection to Anxiety and Gender

In today’s world most young people own or have access to computers and/or mobile phones and use most of the popular social media platforms. In recent years the use of social media has increased a lot among adolescents. Many of them spend many hours daily checking their Facebook, Messenger, Instagram and other popular social media. Research have shown that little less than 35% of Icelandic adolescents used it for 3 hours or more per day. Girls spend more time using social media than boys and at the same time young people increasingly report anxiety symptoms, girls more so than boys.

Worry or fear is a normal part of life. Persons feel it before doing task they find difficult or challenging. Anxiety is, on the other hand, characterized by tension, negative thoughts and physical changes (Davison, 2008). Social media has a lot of positive benefits and can be enjoyable but it can also lead to mental health problems, like anxiety. Muris and Steerneman (2001) researched different demographics and the frequency of anxiety. They found that age did not have an effect but gender did; girls were much more likely to experience high anxiety than boys. Anxiety affects a substantial portion of adolescents and research has shown that if not treated properly in a timely manner the mental health problems can follow young persons into adulthood and often become more severe with age.

Social Media

Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The term “social media” is an umbrella term that refers to the set of services and applications for people to interact with others using network technologies. Within social media are online communities and networked gaming. Instant messaging, blogging, texting and social network sites are all
genres of social media (Boyd, 2008). These tools are used for communication, collaboration, information dissemination, and social organization (Benkler, 2006).

Social media sites are many and different. The use of social media has increased, not the least among young people (O’Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Such sites have grown tremendously in the last few years and are used for both communication and entertainment (O’Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). According to Nielsen (2014) the number of Facebook users grew from 500 million in 2010 to over two billion in 2017 making it the biggest social media network. This enormous use of social media for entertainment, education and communication has prompted research to study its effect on the population, both positive and negative. Recent studies show that the effects are mixed, they can be both beneficial to the user and have downsides (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011; Charoensukmongkol, 2018).

In today’s world most adolescences have mobile phones and use most of the big social media platforms (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). According to O'Keeffe and Pearson (2011) the most common activities among children and teenagers are some kind of social media usage. Young people use social media a lot, and it has increased in recent years. When young old people in Iceland was asked how much time they spent daily on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat, and other social media sites the answers were that 18.5% of boys and 32.2% of girls spent more than 4 hours per day (Kristjánsson et al., 2014).

It has been argued that social media causes more harm than it does good, especially in this age group. The potential for problems with online bullying, access to inappropriate material and sexting are few of the things that youngsters might encounter while using social media. (Bhavana, 2014; O’Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). However, it is not the social media in itself that is good or harmful, it is more the time and attention that is given to it by young
people. Therefore it is preferential that social media are used in combination with other activities, such as sports and other hobbies, to keep the usage of social media in moderation (Bhavana, 2014).

Research on the effect of the time young people spend on social media has on mental health of adolescents have been done. They show that a substantial proportion of young people complain about mental health problems, especially anxiety (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). A study by Kristjánsson et al. (2014) revealed that mental health issues are common among Icelandic adolescents. Only 72% of adolescents, 66% of girls and 78% boys, rate their mental health as good or very good.

Anxiety

A lot is known about anxiety and it has been studied extensively through the years. According to Siegel & Dickstein, (2012) it is estimated that it affects 31% of adolescents, thus becoming the most common mental health problem among young people. Anxiety disorders are also very undertreated, with only 18% of those experiencing this mental health problem getting treatment. Diagnoses and treatment of anxiety in children and adolescents is very important. Evidence have shown that, if it is not treated properly, the problems will follow the person into adulthood, often growing more severe with age (Siegel & Dickstein, 2012).

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, negative thoughts and physical changes such as increased blood pressure, sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat (Davison, 2008). People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns and may avoid certain situations out of worry. Everyone experiences some kind of worry or fear in their lives, e.g. before taking on challenging things like difficult tests, public speaking or interviews. This is considered to be normal. However, when the worry or fear starts to affect the individual’s ability to function normally or interfere with sleep, it
might become an anxiety problem (Smith, Segal & Shubin, 2017). When the reaction to anxiety is extreme it might even become a disorder. The disorder can have mild effects on a person or it can be serious and have a strong impact on daily life (Smith et al., 2017). According to Gale & Davidson (2007) anxiety and worry becomes a problem when people have difficulties in controlling the worry and they experience it in levels above what is considered normal for several months at a time and bad days are more frequent than good days. Anxiety can have serious effects on lives of adolescents, including their education. Young people with anxiety may get lower grades due to difficulty in school and some of them are even unable to finish their education (Siegel & Dickstein, 2012).

**Anxiety and social media**

Social media can weigh in when it comes to anxiety in adolescence, especially since it has grown fast in recent years (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). Social media can create a lot of pressure to create the stereotype that others want to see and also being as popular as others. People compare themselves to each other on social media and can experience that their life is not as fulfilling as the lives of others (Blomfield, Neira & Barber, 2015; Chou & Edge, 2012). People from different age groups can experience this pressure to fit the stereotype on social media but when individuals have not developed fully and gotten a deeper understanding on what matters in life, this can weigh heavily on them and consume their life (Bhavana, 2014). For some adolescents, the only thing that seems to matter is to get recognition from others and make life look more exciting than it really is. They miss out the things that are happening in the now because they are too busy on social media. Chou and Edge (2012) found in their study that young people who spend a lot of time on social media, such as Facebook, experience other people as more happy and with better lives than themselves. Young people seem so occupied by this glamorous images that are put on social media that they forget that this is usually not the reality of other people´s lives (Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2014).
Anxiety related to social media usage can express itself in many ways such as individuals not being able to finish their dinner without checking their phone for updates and messages or can’t leave the house without doing so (Kristjánsson et al., 2014). Also, they may find it difficult to leave the house without having a phone or a computer charger and/or become anxious because the phone may become battery-free and they cannot pursue interactions through social media (Kristjánsson et al., 2014). Adolescents with social media related anxiety are constantly updating the latest news feeds and updates to the social media and there may be a particular challenge to overcome the disorder, especially if the individual has used social media for a long time (Kristjánsson et al., 2014). It can cause problems when people start living a majority of their lives in the world of social media, because, more often than not, it does not portray reality accurately (Blomfield, Neira and Barber, 2015).

According to the results of Kristjánsson et al. (2014), the reasons for social media related anxiety varied, but the main reason was that an increased use of social media could greatly reduce the self-confidence of young girls that looked at social media and saw the glossy images of the lives of others, which often does not represent reality. Blomfield Neira and Barber (2015) suggested that girls who are mostly using the internet to compare themselves with other girls and feel they do not pass the comparison, can experience negative social and mental emotions.

A research done by Steers et al. (2016) stated that online communication may be provoking anxiety. Negative consequences on mental health, including anxiety, may result from using social media. The study also revealed that those who spend more time on Facebook were more likely to report anxiety. One of the reasons for this is that people see or experience that their friends on Facebook seem to be happier than they are (Steers et al., 2016).
Numerous studies have shown that young people that use more time on social media report more anxiety and depression (Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015; Farahani et al., 2011; Pantic et al., 2012). Based on this Skierkowski & Wood (2012) concluded that it should be expected that increased anxiety will be connected with social media. Bullying is common on social media and reviews have linked it to anxiety (Gale & Davidson, 2007).

Restrictions of access to social media also causes young adults considerable anxiety. The social pressure of being available at all times to respond to requests and notifications on social media is creating anxiety in young people (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012).

Although social media can certainly be enjoyable up to a certain point, there can be a lot of interference on them which can lead to feelings like anxiety, as you have the need to be active and not miss out on anything. With the adolescence health in priority it would be better to teach them to set boundaries in their social media use (Fleuriet, Cole & Guerro, 2014).

Anxiety and Gender

Gender differences when it comes to anxiety symptoms with young people are well known and have been given a lot of attention by scientists in recent years (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011). Even though both male and female adolescents show increased symptoms of anxiety with age there seems to be a sharp increase in females during adolescence. This seems to stem from both biological and environmental factors (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011).

Many studies and surveys from various countries show similar results. According to Essau, et al., (2000) who surveyed 1.035 12-17 years old students in Germany 18.6% had anxiety symptoms. This study also found that with age the onset of anxiety increased, and again was higher with females than males. The Nord-Trøndelag Health study (HUNT) gave a
questionnaire to 13-19 year old adolescents. 91% of the 8,984 people invited participated. 10.2% of them reported symptoms of anxiety. The girls reported higher rates than boys, 14.7% for the girls compared to 5.8% for the boys (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2011). In the United States Lewinsohn et al., (1998) found similar results in a group of 1,079 adolescents.

A study of data from the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) showed that anxiety among 13-15 years old children in Iceland had increased since the year 2012, especially with girls. In 2012, 8% of girls in that age group scored high on an anxiety scale, but in 2016 the same number went up to 17%. The increase among boys was 2% to 4% during the same time (Kristjánsson, et al., 2014). In a study by Fleuriet, Cole and Guerrero (2014) participants were sent different messages on Facebook that were supposed to be from a rival. The messages were varied, with only text, attractive or unattractive photos and different emojis. Participants in the study reported more chance of negative emotions like anxiety due to messages and that young women had a stronger negative emotional response than young men. In a study done by Bernstein et al., (1989) among 988 young people found that the reporting of anxiety seemed to be based on gender. Participants that reported high anxiety were more likely to female than male.

Muris and Steerneman (2001) researched anxiety and how different demographics affected the frequency of anxiety. They tested two age groups, early and middle adolescents. The results showed that gender affected the frequency of anxiety while age did not, in either age group. They found that gender had more effect, girls were much more likely to experience high anxiety than boys (e.g., Hale et al. 2005; Hale et al. 2008).

Based on the literature above, the hypotheses of the current study therefore are: H1) that increased anxiety is related to increased use of social media, H2) girls experience more
anxiety than boys, and H3) social media has a stronger effect on anxiety among girls than boys.

Method

The subject matter of this paper is a cross-sectional research of social media use and anxiety symptoms amongst young people and if it affects girls differently than boys. The data used comes from a survey, Ungt fólk (e. Youth in Iceland) 2016, done by The Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA). It is a national Youth in Iceland program of surveys among 10-20 year old children and adolescents from all over Iceland, collecting information on the welfare of young people and family.

Participants

Anonymous questionnaire was given to all high schools in Iceland and students that attended school on a particular day were offered to take part in the survey. The participants were 10,577 students in 8th, 9th, and 10th grade and the response rate was 86%. In the current study a random sample of 1,812 participants was used.

Instruments and measures

In this study an 88 question questionnaire from ICSRA was used. Three questions from the questionnaire were used. They were:

The first question asked students to identify their gender. Possible answers given were either 1 = “male” or 2 = “female”.

The symptoms of anxiety was measured with a scale made out of three questions; How often I recognized being nervous in the past week, How often I recognized sudden fear without any specific reason and How often I was stressed the last week? The possible answers were on a 4 point scale and were: often, sometimes, rarely and almost never. The internal reliability was assessed by using Cronbach’s Alpha, which yielded the result of $\alpha=$
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The three questions were therefore combined into a new variable that equalled the mean of the three questions and was given the name “Anxiety”.

The last question used was how much time on average do you spend on social media. The answers were on an 8 point scale and were: 1= almost no time, 2= half an hour to an hour, 3= about one hour, 4= about two hours, 5= about three hours, 6= about four hours, 7= about five hours and 8= 6 hours or more. This scale was split into three groups where answer options one and two were put together in a group called: Less than an hour per day, answer options three and four were put together into a group called: One to two hours per day and answer options five to eight were put together in the group: Three hours or more per day.

Procedure

The Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) sent a questionnaire to all high schools in Iceland in 2016. ICSRA gave teachers, who oversaw the submission of the questionnaire to students, detailed instructions. Including in the instructions were information to the students about the anonymity of the survey and that they should not write anything on the paper that could be used to identify them. After participants finished to answer the questions as best as they could they were asked to submit their answers to the attending teacher in an envelope.

Design and data analysis

This is a cross-sectional study where the relationship between anxiety and social media use among adolescents was tested. Furthermore, interaction effects between gender and social media use was explored. The data was inserted into SPSS software for analysis. To examine the main and interaction effects of social media use and gender on anxiety Factorial Analysis of Variance (FANOVA) was used.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

The current study analysed the main and interaction effects of social media use, gender and anxiety among Icelandic adolescent with the use of factorial analysis of variance (FANOVA). Figure 1 shows that 72.9% of participants reported very low or low levels of anxiety (3 or less) while 8.8% reported high or very high levels of anxiety (7 or more). The mean of participants score was 2.33 ($SD = 2.52$).

![Descriptive statistics for Anxiety as the dependent variable.](image)

Table 1 reveals that young people in Iceland spend considerable time on social media and girls more than boys. 29.4% of participants used social media for less than an hour per day, 36.0% used it for 1-2 hours per day and 34.6% used it for 3 hours or more per day. 34.6% of the participants were in 8th grade (13 years old), 32.7% of participants were in 9th grade (14 years old) and 32.7% of the participants were in 10th grade (15 years old).
We used FANOVA to assess the impact of gender and social media use on anxiety. Mean and standard deviation can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Social Media Use</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
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<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.48</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>2.10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15 years</td>
<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>102</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
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<td>2.00</td>
<td>111</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.13</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.94</td>
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<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
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<td>2.08</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
<td>1.79</td>
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<td>2.42</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.97</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.71</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.77</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.50</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>2.40</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>2.82</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>2.01</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.49</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>429</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>3.10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>Less than an hour per day</td>
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<td>2.04</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-3 hours per day</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.20</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More than 3 hours per day</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FANOVA revealed that girls were more anxious than boys, $F(1, 1794) = 112.60, p < .001$. Furthermore, FANOVA also showed that social media usage had a direct increasing effect on anxiety $F(2, 1794) = 30.78, p < .001$. Bonferroni post-hoc test showed that those who used social media for 3 hours or more were more anxious than those who used social media for 1-2 hours ($p < .001$). And those who used social media for 1-2 hours were more anxious than those who used social media for less than 1 hour a day ($p < .001$). There was also an interaction effect between gender and social media usage on anxiety, $F(2, 1794) = 4.92, p = .007$, which indicates that social media usage has more effect on anxiety among girls than boys.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for Social media use with Gender.*
Furthermore, the FANOVA revealed that age did not have a significant effect on anxiety, $F(2, 1794) = 2.00, p = .135$. There was not a significant interaction effect between age and gender, $F(2, 1794) = 0.94, p = .391$, nor between age and social media usage, $F(4, 1794) = 0.54, p = .71$. Lastly there was not a significant three-way interaction effect between age, gender and social media usage, $F(4, 1794) = .97, p = .421$.

**Discussion**

The hypothesis of this study were whether the use of social media amongst adolescents had an effect on anxiety and if there were differences between genders. The results supported these hypothesis.

The first hypotheses, whether anxiety increased with increased use of social media, was supported which is also in line with other research (Steers et al., 2016; Banjanin,
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Banjanin, Dimitrijevic & Pantic, 2015; Farahani et al., 2011; Pantic et al., 2012; Thomee et al., 2010). It has also been stated that social media and online interactions can have a negative effect on mental state of the users, including provoking anxiety (Steers et al., 2016). Other research indicate that the social pressure to respond quickly to content and messages could cause anxiety (Thomee et al., 2010) as well as restricted access to text-based communication (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012).

The second hypotheses, whether girls experience more anxiety than boys, was supported by this study. Other research have shown that Icelandic girls, 13-15 years old, scored high on an anxiety scale in a study done by Kristjánsson, et al., (2014), using archival data from ICSRA, considerably higher than boys. Studies have shown that gender affects anxiety among adolescent girls. Girls are likelier to be in a high anxiety group than boys. Anxiety is influenced by gender and that girls reported higher anxiety than boys (Muris and Steerneman 2001; Hale et al. 2005; Hale et al. 2008; Derdikman-Eiron, 2011; Essau, et al., 2000).

The third hypotheses about whether social media has a stronger effect on anxiety among girls is supported by research. According to the results of Kristjánsson et al. (2014), the use of social media can reduce the self-confidence of girls and as a result cause social media related anxiety. Fleuriet, Cole and Guerrero (2014) reported higher number of negative emotions like anxiety with participants as a response to specially constructed Facebook messages. The women in the study showed stronger negative response than men.

Studies on the relationship between time spent on social media and anxiety are in majority consistent in their findings (Steers et al., 2016; Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015; Farahani et al., 2011; Pantic et al., 2012; Thomee et al., 2010; Skierkowski & Wood, 2012). They agree that social media affects the frequency of occurrence of mental problems, including anxiety. It should be noted that correlation between the use of social
media and anxiety does not prove causation. It can be possible that young people, already vulnerable for anxiety or have anxiety want to use social media to communicate rather than conventional conversations and therefore may spend more time online.

The data used in this current study came from a research that was performed by ICSRA and students from all elementary schools in Iceland participated. All participants had anonymity in this self-reported questionnaires and the ratio between genders was equal. That means high external validity in applying the research to the population. The scale used has been very well tested which suggests high internal validity.

In addition to this research it would be interesting to continue with further research on gender differences, to see why girls use more social media and are in a bigger risk of developing anxiety. It would also be interesting to see if individuals prone to mental health problems tend to use social media more than those less prone to such health problems. It is also important to see if social media use is still increasing and if the rise of frequency of anxiety will continue at the same rate. Another aspect that might be considered is that existing research is somewhat focused on Facebook. The development of social media is fast and young people are using other apps more and more.
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