The Role of Social Media in Dating Trends
Among Gen Z College Students

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

With the advent of social media, Generation Z is experiencing an unprecedented climate of virtually navigated dating experiences. This study examined the role social media has played in how Gen Z students engage in dating and relationships on college campuses. From a survey of 90 college students at eight universities in the U.S., the researcher investigated common dating trends, termination strategies, and perceptions of social media. Key findings revealed a trend toward pursuing casual romantic relationships, a tendency to use "ghosting" to terminate relationships, and an association between ghosting experiences and decreased emotional wellbeing. Overall, social media was not seen as having a positive influence on dating and relationships in Generation Z.

I. Introduction

The emergence of social media has brought about significant changes to many aspects of society on a global scale. As social media has grown in popularity, people across the world are communicating through digital interfaces in new ways that may replace traditional interactions. The average person spent 144 minutes per day on social media in 2019, up from 90 minutes per day in 2012 (Clement, 2020). Media Dependency Theory suggests that a higher dependence of an individual on a form of media is accompanied by a stronger influence of such media on the user's perceptions and behaviors (Joo & Teng, 2017, p. 36). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that this influx of time spent on social media is perpetuating a further dependency on that media and also fueling trends in user perceptions and behaviors. The power of this theory is profound when looking at the impact social media has on interpersonal communication, particularly within romantic relationships.

Generation Z has a reputation of having an excessive dependence on social media and an unwillingness to commit in romantic relationships, perhaps as a result of growing up with instant gratification, which has translated into instantaneous online communication in their dating lives (Nealon, 2019). A survey by the American Psychological Association found that Gen Z also is the generation most likely to receive mental health treatment, least likely to report being in good mental health, and has high levels of stress related to societal issues, such as mass shootings and the rise of suicide rates (Bethune, 2019).

This study seeks to investigate the role social media plays in the modern dating scene on college campuses among Generation Z students, and to assess how dating trends in this population have shifted

with the advent of social media, which has made it easier to find and pursue romantic partners online. The purpose of this research is to examine various trends and perceived norms related to social media use and dating behaviors, as well as sentiments around whether social media has had a positive or negative impact on dating and relationships for this generation.

Understanding the behaviors and attitudes that influence how Gen Z engages in the dating scene is important for businesses that profit from dating, such as those in the restaurant, tourism, and online dating industries. This information may also be useful to mental health professionals in understanding the potential consequences of casual dating and excessive social media use on this generation, and how they may lead to further emotional distress in Gen Z patients.

Much of existing research has focused on the role that Facebook plays in dating trends and perceived norms, but that research is somewhat outdated considering Facebook has continuously seen a decline in use among younger populations. The 2018 Infinite Dial report showed that only 29% of users aged 12-34 ranked Facebook as their most commonly used social network, down from 58% of users in this age bracket in 2015 (Marketing Charts, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to consider the impacts of other social media sites and account for other new developments in social media trends that affect romantic relationships, such as the tendency of younger populations to spend more time online and a growing trend of "ghosting" to terminate relationships.

One important term to define for optimal understanding of this research is ghosting. Ghosting is defined by Merriam-Webster (2020) as "the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone (such as a former romantic partner) by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc." This is a relatively new phenomenon popularized by Gen Z and Millennials, which is largely a result of increased use of digital communication and social media to navigate romantic relationships. Other avoidance termination strategies had been used to end relationships prior to the emergence of social media, but social media has since made ghosting a much easier and less confrontational alternative to traditional break-up methods.

II. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on three key categories: the effects of social media use on emotional well-being within intimate relationship structures, the association between social media use and the avoidance of confrontation, and the particular dating trends and behaviors that have emerged as a result of online dating and heavy social media use among Generation Z, a generation raised on social media. Research on these topics provide a cohesive overview of the complex association between social media use and the intricate functions of romantic relationships in the 21st Century, using theories and perspectives from the fields of communication and psychology.

Effects of Social Media Use on Romantic Relationships and Emotions

Social media has sparked a global conversation on its many widely debated positive and negative influences on society. A survey by the American Psychological Association found that 55% of Gen Z feel that social media provides feelings of support, but 45% say it makes them feel judged, and 38% report feeling badly about themselves as a result of social media use (Bethune, 2019). This phenomenon is often studied in the contexts of interpersonal communication and relationship development. A Malaysian study examining behavioral change and social unity as a result of social media use in relationships found that social media is perceived as a tool to communicate with friends and family and a channel to develop stronger relationships. The authors concluded that social media would generally lead to a more cohesive and harmonic society composed of enhanced relationships (Joo & Teng, 2017, p. 42). While there are many positive aspects of social media that help foster relationship development and allow loved ones to maintain healthy levels of communication, there are also negative effects to consider, particularly when it comes to emotional wellbeing and the quality of relationships that are being maintained online.

For example, a 2018 Brigham Young University study found that extensive social media usage is associated with negative impacts on emotional well-being and decreased quality in interpersonal relationships (Christensen, 2018). Survey participants reported negative effects of distraction, irritation, and decreased

quality time spent with significant others in offline settings. Negative effects of social media use on their emotional well-being included depression, frustration and social comparison. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications theory, this study also considered the way social media use and time spent on the Internet affects offline interactions and relationships, finding that participants with heavier social media use reported decreased commitment in relationships, decreased relationship quality offline, and more frequent partner conflicts. Heavy social media users also were found to "have decreased interpersonal competency at initiating offline relationships," meaning that the more time a person spends online, the harder it is for them to find and succeed in new relationships online (Christensen, 2018, p.9). Further exploring these complexities, clinical psychologist and social media expert Jain (2010) warned social media users of the dangers of overestimating levels of intimacy in online relationships. Often, it is difficult for social media users to accurately assess or interpret acts of intimacy online, which can lead to conflicts and miscommunications in offline relationships.

Conflict and miscommunication are relatively common in any romantic relationship, however, social media brings new opportunities for conflict that were nonexistent for past traditional relationships, such as undesirable uncertainty, jealousy, technological incompatibility, interpersonal electronic surveillance and cyberstalking (Fox, 2016). Additionally, upon the dissolution of a relationship, one partner may or may not choose to "unfriend" the ex-partner; both situations may lead to unwelcome feelings or behaviors. A study investigating the dark side of social networking sites in romantic relationships found that "individuals who monitor their ex-partner's Facebook page after a breakup reported greater levels of distress and negative feelings, greater longing for the ex-partner, and less emotional recovery from the breakup," thus exhibiting the negative effects of social media on the termination phase of relationships (p. 86).

With this new territory of attempting to maintain relationships online comes a whole new set of social norms and pressures that can have the power to add significant distress to relationships. A study investigating the role of Facebook in a variety of stages in romantic relationships found that "a normative sociocultural discourse of online expression regarding one's relationship status exists and that it exerts distal pressure on the partners, competing with what is likely a marginalized interpersonal-level discourse of privacy" (Fox, Osborn & Warber, 2014, p. 530). This, essentially, means that certain societal pressures and norms create conflicts in relationships when partners may not be on the same page or may use social media in different ways. This study was conducted through the lens of relational dialectics theory, which suggests that partners in a romantic relationship must try to "balance the effects of forces acting to simultaneously bring them together and pull them apart," which occur both internally and externally, between the couple and their social networks (Fox et. al, 2014, p. 528). This research shows that the interference of social media acts as one of these forces that may pull couples apart if their expectations and preferences are not in alignment. In order to succeed at dating in this digital climate, open communication about these preferences is necessary.

Avoidance Termination Strategies and the Incidence of Ghosting

One of the most well-known trends in modern dating that has directly resulted from the invention of social media is using ghosting as a way to terminate a relationship. An Elle.com survey found that 26% of women and 33% of men have both ghosted and been ghosted before, and only 23% of women and 36% of men have never experienced ghosting on either end before (Crotty, 2017). This indicates that most young adults who are seeking romantic relationships are familiar with the experience of ghosting, and many have been on both the giving and receiving end of this dating trend. A Huffington Post article attributed the motivation for ghosting to a desire to avoid confrontation, difficult conversations, and hurting someone's feelings. However, relationship research has shown that in the long run, ghosting often leads to worse confrontations than would have otherwise occurred with an alternative breakup strategy (Borgueta, 2017).

While ghosting may have amplified and popularized the concept of avoidance in relationship termination, it is not a new phenomenon. A study on relationship termination strategies conducted in the 1970s revealed that while adults preferred confrontation as a termination style, adolescents and late adolescents preferred avoidance as a termination style (Baxter & Philpott, 1981). Since college is a time period when students are transitioning between these life stages, it is reasonable to see why avoidance termination styles may continue into the college years. The study also found that avoidance ultimately tends to be more harmful for both the terminator and recipient; the former facing guilt for taking the "coward's way out of the relationship" and potentially hurting the other's feelings, and the latter internalizing anger and hurt feelings and being more likely to confront the terminator in a more dramatic or embarrassing fashion than would be the case in an initially confrontational relationship termination (Baxter & Philpott, 1981, p. 4).

Generation Z Dating Trends and Preferences

Along with the rise of social media, a new category of social networking has emerged: online dating. A Google and Qualtrics study on Gen Z dating trends found that for the majority of Gen Z, a generation more racially and ethnically diverse than any other, using dating apps allows them to be diverse in who they date and date outside of where they live (Frantz, 2019). However, while dating apps do provide an easier way to meet potential partners, a study on usage of the popular dating app, Tinder, found that 70% of college students have never actually met any matches in person and 45% of college students report using Tinder merely for "confidence boosting procrastination" (Iqbal, 2020). This research indicated that many college students are not using dating apps to pursue serious relationships, but instead for casual hookups or an occasional confidence boost from a stranger.

When looking at actual behavior of Gen Z versus their actual core preferences for dating behaviors, there appears to be a disconnect. Gen Z is infamously known for engaging in more casual relationships than previous generations, as eloquently explained a Clemson University newspaper editor: "Instead of building longer-term connections with romantic partners, Gen Zers build hundreds of surface-level connections with their numerous followers, creating relationships that are empirically less fulfilling than the more serious relationships undertaken by older generations" (Nealon 2019). However, this may not be something Gen Zers actually want for themselves. A 2018 survey of more than 4,000 college students found that only 14% of students desired relationships consisting of casual sex, defined as "friends with benefits," and only 11% desired hookups, defined as "sexual encounters with no expectations attached." However, when asked what they thought their college peers wanted out of relationships, more than half of respondents believed peers desired both of these types of relationships (EVERFI, 2020). This indicates a distortion between individual wants and needs from relationships and external perceptions of cultural expectations in relationships. This disconnect could explain why many Gen Zers complain about the "hookup culture" on college campuses, but generally tend to perpetuate the cycle by engaging in dating behaviors that they think the majority of their peers prefer.

III. Methods

H1: The dependence of college students on social media has led to a culture of relationships that are more casual than previous generations.

H2: Extensive social media usage leads to avoiding confrontation in romantic relationships.

H3: Extensive social media usage leads to lowering self-esteem in romantic relationships

H4: Gen Z college students do not think social media has had a positive impact on dating and relationships in their generation.

Research hypotheses were tested using quantitative methods. A 15-question Google Forms survey was distributed to a non-probability sample of American college students at eight different universities, over the course of seven days. The research participants were selected through convenience and snowball sampling. The survey was sent via group chat texts, GroupMe messages, and posted on Facebook groups to peers and acquaintances of the researcher. An estimated 200 individuals in the target population were reached by the distribution of the survey, with the goal that 100 would submit responses. Given the circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the evacuation of students from campuses, the survey was distributed electronically. While random sampling would be ideal for a study of this kind, a non-probability convenience sample was chosen given the pandemic and limited time span.

Demographic information was gathered on survey participants, including gender, year in school, and the name of the university attended. Further questions addressed topics directly aimed at testing research hypotheses, such as participants' time spent on social media use, behaviors and opinions related to dating on college campuses, experiences with social media-related dating trends, and overall sentiments toward social media. The researcher included a disclosure at the beginning of the study that stated that participation in this study was voluntary and that participants could exit the study at any time. The researcher also made it clear that the confidentiality of each participant would be maintained.

IV. Findings

Survey responses were gathered from 90 participants in the target population: 84% (n=76) of respondents were female, while only 16% (n=14) of respondents were male. The majority of respondents (63%, n=57) were seniors in college, with a relatively even distribution among the other three ranks. More than two-thirds of survey participants (69%, n=62) attended Elon University, while 18% (n=16) attended Villanova University, and 13% (n=12) attended a variety of other universities in the United States.

College Students Are Engaging in More Casual Relationships than Serious Ones

To test H1, that the dependence of college students on social media has led to a culture of relationships that are more casual than previous generations, the researcher asked participants about the number of times they had engaged in four different types of relationships during their time in college: monogamous long-term relationships, exclusive yet casual and/or short-term relationships, relationships where there was no defined label about the relationship status but involved numerous (2+) intimate encounters, and one-night stands. Figure 1 below shows the number of times participants report being in each type of relationship on a scale ranging from 0 to 6+ times.
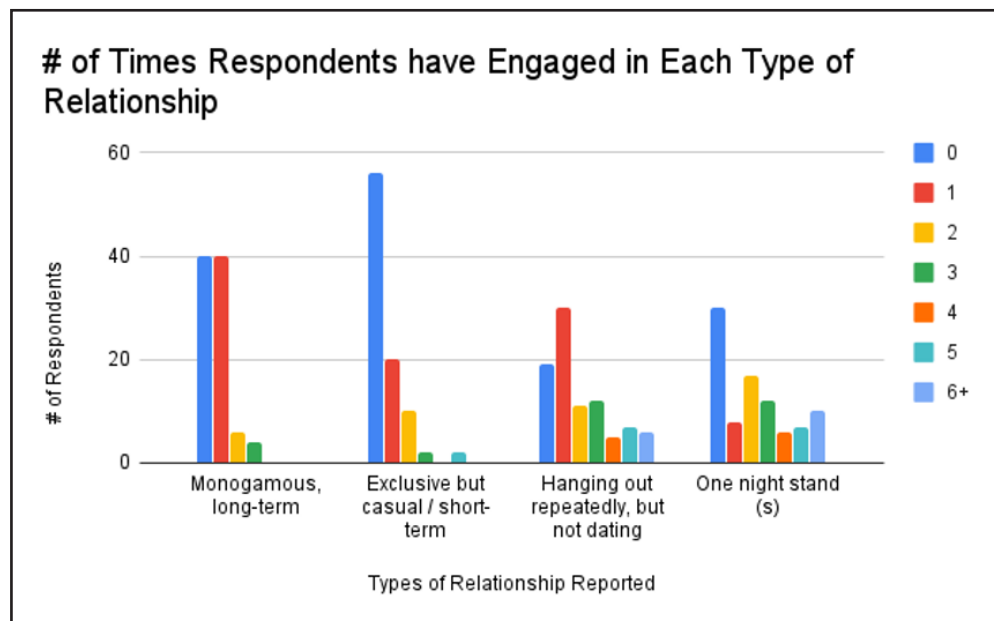

Figure 1. Incidence of Relationship Types Among Participants

Figure 1 displays four relationship types starting with a long-term, serious relationship and getting more casual along the x-axis. As the relationship type becomes more casual, the respondents reported a higher number of experiences. Survey participants reported engaging in more casual relationships than long-term ones. This graph revealed that 44% (n=40) of respondents have never been in a long-term relationship, and only 11% (n=10) have been in more than one long-term relationship, with the maximum number being three. This indicates that many college students are not experiencing long-term relationships, and of those who are, very few are doing so repeatedly.

Further, 79% (n=71) of participants have been in at least one casual, unlabeled relationship, as defined in the third relationship category. 67% (n=60) have had at least one one-night stand, and 39% (n=35) have had 3 or more. Thus, college students have more dating experiences that fall under these two casual categories than the long-term, monogamous category. Of those who are experiencing forms of casual intimacy, they tend to do so repeatedly. These results support the hypothesis that the American college student population is trending toward engaging in casual relationships as opposed to more serious ones.

Dating apps may be used more commonly for talking and entertainment purposes

Dating apps on social media may be contributing to this environment of casual dating and intimacy. To test H1 further, Table 1 cross tabulates the number of participants who have gone on dates from dating apps with their frequency of dating app use. This data shows that even though more than half of participants (52%, n=47) reported having used dating apps, the majority of those who are using dating apps (64%, n=30) have never actually gone on a date from one. Just 19% (n=17) of all participants have gone on a date from a dating app.

Table 1. Frequency of Dating App Use versus Incidence of Dates

Status of Dating App Use	Frequency	Have you ever gone on a date or met someone from a dating app?	
		Yes	No
I do not use dating apps	43	0 (0%)	43 (100%)
Yes, but I rarely check it	18	4 (22%)	14 (78%)
Yes, and I check it every now and then	18	6 (33%)	12 (67%)
Yes, and I check it regularly	0	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I have used dating apps in the past, but I no longer do	11	7 (64%)	4 (36%)
Total Respondents Who've Used Dating Apps	**47**	**17 (36%)**	**30 (64%)**
Total Respondents	**90**	**17 (19%)**	**73 (81%)**

The concept that dating apps are popular to use, but not popular for actually meeting people, is supported by the fact that many in this population are not focused on finding a serious partner. These findings reflect a previously cited 2020 Tinder usage study which found that 70% of college students have never actually met any matches in person, and 45% of college students report using Tinder merely for "confidence boosting procrastination" (Iqbal, 2020).

Avoidance termination strategies are common with Gen Z college students

Many Gen Z college students are using the method of "ghosting" to terminate romantic relationships, rather than using traditional breakup methods. Much of communication between romantic partners now occurs online or via social media, which has facilitated the execution of ghosting to end relationships. To test H2, that social media use leads to a tendency to avoid confrontation in romantic relationships, the researcher asked participants about their experiences with avoidance in relationships. In this study, 69% of participants (n=62) have ghosted someone who they are longer interested in at least once, and 44% of participants (n=40) have ghosted someone two or more times. Similarly, 77% of participants (n=69) have been ghosted by someone who is no longer interested in them, and 43% of participants (n=39) have been ghosted two or more times.

These results show the significant popularity of ghosting in the Gen Z college student population, supporting H2, which associates social media use with a tendency to avoid confrontation in relationships. This data aligns with the Elle.com survey which found that 74% of women and 67% of men had experienced ghosting (Crotty, 2017), indicating that the college student population may not be different from the general population when it comes to the high incidence of ghosting.

Ghosting is often associated with negative feelings and emotions

Looking to test H3, which associates social media use with lowering self-esteem, this study investigated emotional reactions to experiences with ghosting. It was found that ghosting is highly associated with negative emotions and feelings. Of those who have been ghosted, 59% (n=43) reported feeling self-conscious, 63% (n=46) reported feeling disappointed, 59% (n=43) reported feeling sad, and 43% (n=31) reported feeling anxious. Only 11% (n=8) of participants reported not being phased emotionally. These findings suggest a significant correlation between ghosting and emotional distress, which could potentially have negative influences on mental health.

Participants were then asked about their preferred alternative termination strategies to ghosting. Of those who had been ghosted by a romantic interest before, 20.5% (n=15) reported being fine with the way their partner had ended things and stated they handled the situation properly. However, 63% of respondents (n=46) wished they had been texted to end things, and 41% (n=30) wished they had a face-to-face conversation to end things.

These findings indicate that the majority of participants would have preferred an alternate termination strategy to ghosting, with the most popular alternative being ending things via texting, followed by ending things in person. Interestingly, this shows that the majority of college-age students are fine with avoiding face-to-face confrontation about a breakup, as long as there is some sort of virtual conversation or acknowledgment. Technology can still be used as an escape for difficult in-person conversations, but Gen Z college students do not want to be ghosted.

Social media is not seen as a positive influence on dating and relationships

To test H4, that social media has not positively impacted dating in Gen Z, the researcher asked questions about social media use and effects. Participants were asked to estimate their daily time spent on social media, in addition to whether they think social media has had a positive impact on dating and relationships in their generation. Table 2 below shows a cross tabulation of the answers to these two questions. The researcher wanted to look for a potential link between time spent on social media and perceptions of social media's overall influence.

Table 2. Hours Spent on Social Media vs. Whether Social Media is Viewed Positively

Does social media have a positive impact on dating and relationships in your generation?				
Daily hours on social media	Yes	I am not sure	No	**Total**
Less than 1	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1
1-3	10 (25%)	11 (27%)	19 (48%)	**40**
3-5	8 (23%)	13 (37%)	14 (40%)	**35**
5-7	2 (17%)	6 (50%)	4 (33%)	**12**
More than 7	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	**2**
Total	22 (24%)	31 (35%)	37 (41%)	**90 (100%)**

In regard to H4, it is important to note that only 24% (n=22) of respondents felt social media had a positive impact on dating and relationships for Gen Z, with 35% (n=31) saying they were not sure, and 41% (n=37) saying it did not. The distribution of social media impact perceptions was relatively even across time spent on social media. Social media did tend to be viewed as "negative" up until 5 hours of reported use, then moved to "unsure" up to 7 hours, before moving to "positive" beyond that. It is possible that there is a relationship between more extensive social media use and positive perceptions of social media, but further research would be necessary to investigate this possible correlation.

Participants were also asked to debate social media's positive and negative influences in an open-ended question. Table 3 below summarizes the common trends and sentiments noted by 73 respondents about the positive and negative impacts of social media on dating and relationships in Gen Z, providing key insights directly from the mouths of the target audience.

Table 3. Commonly Reported Impacts of Social Media on Dating in Gen Z

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Helps in general with keeping in touch regularly	Makes it easier to line up back-up choices for when a relationship doesn't work out: • "Too much quantity, not enough quality. The convenience of dating apps has dehumanized dating." - Response 88
Gives people the confidence to "shoot their shot" with lower risk than making a move in person	Makes it easier to end relationships without doing it face-to-face, thus avoiding emotional confrontation.
Gives people the opportunity to meet others they wouldn't normally meet	Creates unrealistic expectations and standards in relationships, along with pressure to compare your relationship to others: "Relationship Goals"
Helps with maintaining long-term relationships	Allows people to hide behind a screen and not show their real personality. Often "talking" to someone online leads to disappointment when they act differently in person or the connection isn't there.
Makes it easier to get to know someone without committing right away	Creates a lack of real-life connections and causes people to live less in the moment
	Allows people to avoid expressing direct intentions; people can be "sneaky" and talk to multiple people at once
	Can cause confusion and mixed signals in the initiation of relationships
	Has exaggerated the "hook-up culture" on college campuses
	Can evoke mental strife & insecurities when a partner is not responding or might be with someone else

Common sentiments were that social media allows people to be more connected, keep in touch, and talk to people who they never would otherwise meet. Many participants reasoned that the beginning phase of relationships is simplified by social media, which makes it easier to pursue romantic interests and get to know one another quickly. However, social media also creates many issues around jealousy and trust and makes it easy for people to talk to numerous romantic prospects at once, which can lead to shallower connections. Several participants mentioned the phenomenon of "hiding behind a keyboard," making it difficult to tell someone's true personality or intentions. Participants also attributed social media to perpetuating unrealistic "relationship goals," creating pressure to present relationships in certain ways and misleading followers about what a true relationship entails. It was also commonly expressed that Gen Z has a collective fear of commitment, likely due to the ease of finding and pursuing multiple romantic interests online or "lining up" new prospects in the event that a relationship does not work out.

V. Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights regarding the culture of dating on modern day college campuses. The analyses of common trends and perceptions reported by members of this target population show that social media has significantly influenced the way this age group approaches dating and relationships, creating a unique set of norms unknown to previous generations.

Many college students are experiencing casual dating and other types of relationships more often than traditional, long-term, and monogamous ones. Dating apps are commonly used within this population, but relatively few people are actually going on dates or meeting romantic interests in-person. It was also found that ghosting has become a popular method of relationship termination, largely due to the ease with which social media allows users to cut off communication, in addition to a tendency in this population to avoid confrontation. Ghosting also seems to be significantly associated with negative emotions, such as self-consciousness, anxiety and sadness, which could have implications on mental health in this population.

Overall, social media was not viewed as having positive influences on dating and relationships in Generation Z. The majority ultimately either felt unsure, or staunchly felt the negative outweighed the positive. This research will be helpful as society progresses in order to maximize social media's communication-related benefits and minimize its damage done to interpersonal relationship management and mental health outcomes.

The majority of respondents in this study were female (84%) and seniors in college (63%). Future research would benefit from a more even distribution of gender and age, in order to more accurately generalize these findings to the American college student population. As mentioned earlier, there was an apparent correlation between harmful social media behaviors in dating, such as ghosting or stringing along multiple interests at once, and negative effects on mental health. Investigating these claims further might provide helpful knowledge about this relationship and have meaningful implications for mental health professionals.

Acknowledgements

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