

DOWN IN MINUTES, OUT FOR SIX HOURS: A BRIEF REPORT ON FEELINGS DURING THE OUTAGE OF WHATSAPP, INSTAGRAM, AND FACEBOOK

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ABSTRACT: *Social media (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) has become a critical part of life for many people. Moreover, the use of social media influences mental and physical health. The importance of social media in daily life was evident during the global outage of social media in October 2021, which manifested as discomfort and displeasure at the incident that allegedly paused lives for 6 h. The current study aims to examine the feelings experienced during the outage from the Egyptian perspective. The study recruited 300 participants aged between 16 and 65 years via convenience sampling. An online survey that collected demographic information and presented one question about feelings experienced during the outage was conducted. The results indicated that the majority of the participants experienced negative feelings (e.g., boredom, loneliness, and frustration), whereas other participants stated relief, relaxation, and comfort. Lastly, a few participants did not recognize the situation as a universal problem.*

KEYWORDS: outage, social media, Egypt, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

“Facebook and its family of apps, including Instagram and WhatsApp, were inaccessible for hours on Monday, taking out a vital communications platform used by billions” (Isaac & Frenkel, 2021). On October 4, 2021, an outage occurred that disabled three vital social media applications, namely, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp around the world. The outage affected the lives of billions of people who exhibited discomfort and annoyance at the incident, which allegedly paused their lives for 6 h. This study aims to explore and report perceived (self-reported) feelings about the incident from the Egyptian perspective, because doing so may provide researchers with the opportunity to elucidate the impact of social media or, in this case, its absence on individuals.

In 2021, in an annual report on social media use in the United States, the Pew Research Center (PEW) mentioned that 77% of adults (out of 1,502) actively use social media every day, a percentage that has been in constant increase since the initiation of these apps. Specifically, the proportion of active Facebook users is 73%, whereas Instagram reached 43%. YouTube ranked first in 2021 at 86% which is a significant increase since 2019 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

The term social media or social networking site (SNS) refers to Internet-mediated applications, where individuals use the space to publicly exchange personal and non-professional ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, among others, with high accessibility and immediacy. Contents shared among users are characterized by originality, which is called user-generated content. According to this definition, one would find hundreds, if not thousands, of applications that have been/are being created to date. These applications include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and the new public favorite TikTok. Therefore, various methods of classification have been established to further understand the characteristics and features of these applications and how they influence use (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Kaplan (2010) assumes that social media can be categorized into two dimensions. The first is the *media* dimension, which is divided into social presence and media richness. Based on social presence theory, social presence denotes all physical characteristics of an app, such as the acoustics, visuals, and amount of contact provided to users. The higher the social presence, the more intimate the communication between users, which enables increased influence (Short et al., 1976; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Alternatively, media richness is a concept based on the assumption that media, in general, is used to reduce ambiguity, that is, it enables people to find answers to their questions (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Applications differ in the richness and effectiveness of information provided to users. As such, these factors influence when and how users access these applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The second dimension is the *social* dimension, which involves how people present themselves through self-disclosure in an endeavor to gain likes, comments, friends, or even public attention (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Self-disclosure occurs in several forms, where the individual may or may not intentionally share personal information, such as thoughts, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and appearances. This process of self-disclosure frequently aims to presenting oneself in a desirable manner to achieve a certain goal. Certainly, various applications provide different means of self-disclosure; therefore, diverse users access applications according to objectives that revolve around self-disclosure.

Several studies were conducted to examine the effect of the use of different social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, on mental health and well-being. The majority of these studies produced similar results and reported on the extremely negative effects of social media on well-being. Correlational studies found that high levels of social media use are positively correlated with technostress¹ and depressive symptoms but negatively correlated with happiness, performance, and efficiency (Brooks, 2015; Donnelly & Kuss, 2016; Lee et al., 2020; Tarafdar et al., 2007). Regression analyses provided evidence that time allotted for Facebook as well as Instagram use predicted high levels of social comparison, low self-esteem, and negative affect (Faelens et al., 2021). Moreover, experimental studies found that limiting social media use to 10 min per day per application leads to a significant increase in well-being, lack of loneliness, anxiety, and fear of missing out among respondents who reported that, “not comparing their lives to others positively impacted their perceived happiness and productivity” (Hunt et al., 2018).

¹ Technostress represents the overwhelming effect and invasion that people experience with social media.

Recent studies (e.g., Serenko et al., 2021; Turel, 2019; Yohanna, 2020) demonstrated that the positivity or negativity of posted contents mediate the effects of social media. Forest and Wood (2012) proposed that although people with low levels of self-esteem reportedly expect social media to improve their social life, they typically cannot obtain these benefits from strangers or friends. People with low levels of self-esteem generally post negative content on their pages. Thus, they mainly induce negative reactions and less likeability online.

Furthermore, behavioral patterns toward social media use mediate the effect of social media. Donnelly and Kuss (2016) revealed a positive correlation between social media addiction and depressive symptoms. This finding was supported by Boer et al (2021), who found that social media use at a level similar to addiction was associated with decreased mental health as individuals become engaged in increased social comparison and cyber victimization.

Hence, studies argue that these unique features influence the use of social media applications, which may lead to addiction. High levels of SNS use generally exert extremely negative effects on well-being and happiness. Consequently, the current study aims to explore feelings experienced during the worldwide outage that occurred in October 2021. Shedding light on this incident offers the potential to discover more about the complex dynamics between people and social media. The incident was sudden and unplanned. Thus, the study expects that individual reactions are more authentic than those elicited through an experiment. Thus, the results will provide meaningful insights for research on this topic.

METHODOLOGY

We used convenience sampling to recruit social media users, where 300 users responded to the online survey. The age range of the participants was 16 to 65 years (male = 25%). The majority of the participants completed a bachelor's degree (89.5%), high school (9.5%), and a doctorate degree (0.4%). The majority of the respondents (86.5%) reported that their work is independent of social media. Data were collected on October 4 till 6, 2021, in Egypt. An online survey was distributed through three SNSs, namely, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp after the restoration of social media services. The snowballing method was adopted to increase the number of participants. The online survey lasted for two days after the outage. All subjects were assured that participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed. The survey posed only one question about their feelings during the outage. In addition, we collected sociodemographic information, such as age, sex, level of education, and the dependency of their work on social media. Qualitative content analysis was applied to the current data. This method is one of several qualitative methods currently available for data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, it represents a systematic and objective system of describing and quantifying phenomena (Schreier, 2012). For a successful content analysis, data can be grouped into categories and concepts that describe the phenomenon (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

RESULTS

Participants were asked to respond to a question about their feelings during the outage of social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram) as shown in Table 1:

Table 1 demonstrates the extracted categories across sex.

Table 1. Five categories of feelings during the outage						
Categories	Total sample (<i>n</i> = 300)		Male (<i>n</i> = 125)		Female (<i>n</i> = 175)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Normal emotions: relaxed and comfortable	100	33.3%	45	36%	55	31.4%
Sub-categories of negative feelings						
1. Boredom without alternative activities during the outage	70	23.3%	40	32%	30	17.1%
2. Boredom for the first 2 h with alternative activities afterward (e.g., reading, conversing with family or friends, sleeping early, cooking, and cleaning the house)	60	20%	20	16%	40	22.8%
3. Feeling of separation from the world	40	13.3%	10	8%	30	17.1%
Knowledge of a universal outage	30	10%	10	8%	20	11.4%

The results reveal that although the majority of participants (56.6%) expressed negative feelings during the outage, such as boredom, separation, and frustration, 33.3% of them reported relief, relaxation, and comfort and added that the outage was a chance to take a break from social media. Only 10% believed that the outage was due to a faulty Internet connection and stated that they did not consider the incident a universal problem. Figure 1 presents the results.

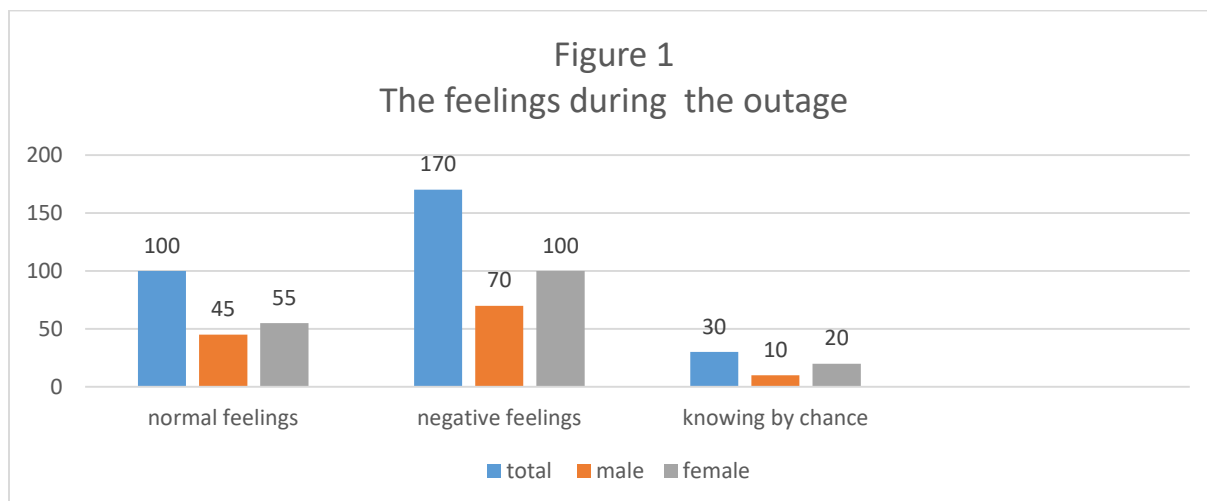


Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of the respondents, especially female participants, reported highly negative emotions during the outage.

DISCUSSION

The current study intended to shed light on feelings related to the universal outage of three SNSs, namely, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp as an indicator of the level of dependency on and frequency of use of social media. The results indicated that more than half of the respondents reported that the social media outage was a major concern, because social media is used for various reasons, such as helping people communicate easily; following the news and posts from friends; sharing of memories or personal events; and achieving profit through private businesses. Alternatively, feelings of being relaxed and comfortable despite the outage may not necessarily indicate the frequency of use of social media, which can be attributed to the fact that the outage only lasted for 6 h. As such, these feelings may change if the outage lasted for a longer period.

In line with the current findings, previous studies demonstrated that the increased use of social media leads to several negative impacts, such as a reduction in real communication between people (face-to-face interaction). Moreover, social media use is considered a waste of time and effort, especially for people who tend to use it for a long time, because it can hinder daily life activities, hobbies, and social interaction with families and real friends (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Yohanna, 2020). In addition, previous studies confirmed that the degree of the engagement of adolescents in social media can potentially lead to numerous negative psychological and physical effects (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Nawafleh et al., 2012; Serenko et al., 2021). In terms of the psychological impacts, frequent social media use influence the well-being adolescents, such as depression, antisocial behavior, social anxiety, aggressive tendencies, social delinquency, parent-child relationship conflict, technology addiction, engagement in unsafe activities, and loss of motivation for achievement, increased absenteeism, and poor academic performance (Serenko et al., 2021; Turel, 2019; Yohanna, 2020). The physical effects include sleep issues, unhealthy eating habits (Serenko et al., 2021), and stomach ache (Nawafleh et al., 2012).

Negative feelings during the outage can be explained using social presence theory. According to Lowenthal (2010), social presence tends to fall along a spectrum with a focus on interpersonal emotional connection between communicators on the one end and the perception of another person as being *present, there, or real* at the other end. According to Short et al. (1976), intimacy is one of the concepts of social presence, which is influenced by the physical distance between communicators and personal conversations. Therefore, when the outage occurred, the majority of the people felt that they lost connection with other people and, thus, intimacy due to the lack of self-disclosure. In other words, applications with the highest social presence and potential for social presentation through self-disclosure would be very distinctive applications that promote extensive exchange and influence between users. For this reason, several applications are more addictive than others (Donnelly & Kuss, 2016). In this manner, therefore, the present study elucidated the causes of negative feelings during the outage.

CONCLUSION

The results suggest that individuals under immense technostress and engagement in social media felt happiness and relief during the outage, whereas those using social media for self-oriented posts

and virtual communication felt more upset and bored. Accordingly, the current results present several implications. First, people should reconsider the importance of social media in their life. Second, the frequent use of social media is time- and effort-intensive, which can hinder them from performing their duties and daily activities (e.g., hobbies and real social interaction). Third, the results elucidated the negative impacts of social media on physical and mental health. Fourth, although the outage lasted for only 6 h, other people reported that the outage negatively impacted their work. As such, individuals who are dependent on social media for work should find alternative means to continue their work in the case of another outage, which may last for even longer periods.

Future Research

Although the current study highlighted the feelings related to using social media. There is, therefore, a definite need for other efforts to examine the long-term impacts of using social media on both psychological and mental health. This study suggests also studying these impacts across age and different educational levels. Further work needs for those who depend on social media to achieve their work in order to investigate other alternatives for performing their business.

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