

## Social Media Use Among College Students (18–24): Enhancing Social Connection Or Intensifying Isolation?

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the paradoxical influence of social media use among college students aged 18–24, a demographic that represents both the most digitally active and the most psychologically vulnerable population segment. The purpose of this study is to investigate how different patterns of social media engagement shape emotional and social outcomes among young adults. The research integrates findings from fifteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 with preliminary quantitative data collected from 30 college students through a structured Google Form survey.*

*The study distinguishes between active and passive forms of social media use and examines the mediating roles of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social comparison, and social media addiction. Results indicate that active and purposeful engagement tends to enhance emotional well-being and strengthen social connectedness, whereas passive scrolling and compulsive usage contribute to loneliness and reduced psychological health. These findings suggest that the quality and intention behind social media use—rather than the total time spent online—largely determine its psychosocial effects. The study recommends incorporating digital well-being education and promoting mindful engagement practices to support healthier technology use among college students.*

**Key Word:** Social media, college students, social connection, isolation, addiction, loneliness, FoMO, digital well-being, passive use, active use, mental health.

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### **I. Introduction**

Social media plays a dominant role in the daily lives of college students, shaping how they communicate, build relationships, consume information, and construct their personal identities. For individuals aged 18–24, platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Facebook are not merely entertainment tools; they function as essential spaces for social belonging, academic collaboration, and emotional expression. Recent studies indicate that this demographic spends a substantial amount of time engaging with social platforms, making them particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of online behavior [4], [7].

Despite its benefits, the rise of constant digital communication has introduced a range of emotional and psychosocial challenges. Research suggests that the outcomes of social media use differ significantly depending on the nature of engagement. Active behaviors—such as messaging peers, commenting, or sharing content—are associated with stronger interpersonal connections and enhanced well-being. In contrast, passive activities such as silent scrolling, browsing others' content, and monitoring social interactions without participating often correspond with heightened anxiety, envy, depressive feelings, and emotional isolation [6], [9].

Prior studies also suggest that social media use can intensify emotional loneliness among college students, particularly when online interactions replace meaningful offline relationships [1].

This duality represents the **connection–isolation paradox**, in which the same platforms that facilitate social connection can simultaneously contribute to psychological strain. Understanding this paradox is essential, as college students are at a critical stage of identity development and relational growth.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how different patterns of social media use—active, passive, and compulsive—shape emotional outcomes among college students. By integrating insights from recent literature with primary data, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media can both strengthen social support and contribute to emotional vulnerability, depending on behavioral patterns and underlying motivations.

## **II. Literature Review**

This study synthesizes findings from fifteen peer-reviewed research articles published between 2020 and 2025. The literature reveals several recurring themes that explain why social media affects users differently depending on their engagement patterns and psychological predispositions.

### **A. Active vs. Passive Use**

Active social media use involves purposeful behaviors such as interacting with peers, posting content, and participating in conversations. Several studies report that active engagement enhances social support, emotional closeness, and a sense of community by fostering meaningful interpersonal exchanges [4], [7]. Students who engage actively tend to experience stronger belongingness and reduced feelings of loneliness.

In contrast, passive use—characterized by browsing, observing others' posts, and scrolling without interaction—is consistently linked to negative emotional outcomes such as loneliness, envy, social comparison, and decreased life satisfaction [6], [9]. Because passive users frequently encounter idealized online portrayals, they become more vulnerable to negative self-evaluations, reduced self-esteem, and emotional distress. These distinctions form a foundational basis for understanding the connection–isolation paradox explored in this study.

Excessive sharing and exposure to emotionally charged or socially competitive content also contribute to psychological distress among college students, worsening the effects of passive engagement [8].

### **B. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

FoMO is recognized as a central psychological factor influencing emotional responses to social media. Defined as the anxiety that others might be experiencing rewarding events without one's involvement, FoMO often triggers compulsive checking behaviors and increases the intensity of social media use [10]. Studies show that higher FoMO levels are associated with stress, decreased well-being, and problematic digital habits. The literature consistently identifies FoMO as a mediating factor that explains why frequent engagement—especially passive engagement—can intensify emotional vulnerability.

### **C. Social Comparison**

College students are particularly susceptible to social comparison, especially on image-centric platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Exposure to curated and idealized content encourages upward comparisons, where individuals evaluate themselves against seemingly superior peers. Prior research indicates that frequent social comparison is associated with lower self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and increased depressive symptoms [11], [12]. The literature suggests that comparison tendencies are more pronounced among passive users, reinforcing the argument that the *type* of engagement strongly influences emotional outcomes.

### **D. Social Media Addiction**

Social media addiction refers to compulsive and uncontrollable usage patterns, including excessive checking, difficulty limiting use, and withdrawal-like discomfort during periods of disconnection. Several studies link addictive use to decreased academic performance, impaired concentration, poor sleep quality, and emotional exhaustion [13]. Addiction also weakens real-world relationships, contributing to greater loneliness and reduced face-to-face interaction.

Recent evidence also indicates that rising communication-related anxiety contributes to problematic usage patterns, further intensifying emotional strain among students [3].

These findings underscore the importance of viewing addiction as a mediator in the relationship between online engagement and emotional well-being.

### **E. Summary of Literature Trends**

Across the reviewed literature, a consistent conclusion emerges: **the emotional effects of social media depend not on the platform itself, but on the nature of engagement**. Active and meaningful use promotes social connection and well-being, whereas passive, compulsive, or comparison-driven behavior elevates emotional risks. This study builds upon these themes by exploring how these patterns manifest among college students in an Indian context, contributing culturally specific insights to a widely researched global issue.

## **III. Conceptual Framework Explanation**

The conceptual framework developed for this study integrates the major constructs identified across the reviewed literature. It illustrates how different patterns of social media engagement—active and passive use—lead to contrasting emotional outcomes among college students. The framework is grounded in established theories of digital interaction and psychosocial behavior.

Active social media use is conceptualized as purposeful, interactive engagement that strengthens peer relationships, facilitates communication, and enhances perceived social support. As a result, active use is expected to increase feelings of social connection and belongingness.

In contrast, passive social media use involves browsing and observing content without direct interaction. Prior research suggests that passive consumption heightens psychological vulnerabilities by increasing exposure to idealized online portrayals. This often leads to elevated levels of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), upward social comparison, and compulsive checking behaviors, all of which contribute to emotional isolation and loneliness.

Psychological mediators—FoMO, social comparison, and social media addiction—are positioned at the center of this framework. These constructs determine whether online engagement functions as a source of genuine connection or becomes a pathway to emotional strain. By incorporating these mediators, the framework provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the dual effects of social media usage on student well-being.

This conceptual model guided the development of the survey instrument, selection of variables, and interpretation of empirical findings in the present study.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between social media use patterns, mediating factors (FoMO, social comparison, addiction), and emotional outcomes (social connection or loneliness).

Source: Developed by authors based on insights from [2], [4], [5], [7], [23]–[26].

#### IV. Research Gap And Implications

Although a substantial body of research has examined the psychological effects of social media, several significant gaps remain. First, relatively few studies simultaneously explore both the positive and negative dimensions of social media use within a unified analytical framework, with most focusing on either social connection or psychological risk—but not both [4], [7]. Second, research on Indian college students remains limited despite their high level of digital engagement and increasing exposure to online environments. Much of the existing evidence is derived from Western populations, raising concerns about cultural generalizability.

Third, emerging studies indicate that limited media literacy skills contribute to heightened digital loneliness, as students without adequate digital guidance are more vulnerable to negative online experiences and emotional strain [14]. These findings highlight the need to examine contextual factors that may shape how students interpret and respond to online interactions.

Fourth, several emotional mediators—such as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), social comparison tendencies, and social media addiction—are often examined in isolation. Only a handful of studies integrate these mediators together to explain how social media behavior contributes to both connection and isolation. Fifth, most prior studies rely on large-scale surveys but seldom incorporate detailed behavioral distinctions such as active versus passive engagement.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing both active and passive usage patterns and linking them to emotional outcomes using primary data from Indian college students. By incorporating key psychological mediators into a single conceptual framework, this research provides a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms through which social media shapes student well-being. The findings thus contribute culturally relevant insights and advance theoretical understanding of the connection–isolation paradox in the digital age.

#### V. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that integrates an extensive review of existing literature with primary quantitative data collected through a structured survey. The methodology is designed to examine

how different patterns of social media engagement influence emotional outcomes among college students aged 18–24.

#### **A. Research Design**

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved a comprehensive review of fifteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 to develop a deeper understanding of how active and passive social media use shape psychosocial well-being.

The second phase consisted of primary data collection using a structured Google Form. The survey included behavioral, psychological, and emotional variables grounded in the conceptual framework. This mixed-method design enabled the integration of established theoretical insights with real-world student experiences.

#### **B. Sample Size and Respondents**

The intended sample size for this research was 300 students; however, due to time constraints and limited respondent availability, 30 complete and valid responses were obtained. Although the final sample size is relatively small, it provides meaningful preliminary insights into digital behavior patterns among college students.

To maintain transparency, this study acknowledges that the findings may not be fully generalizable to the wider population. Nevertheless, **the results from these 30 respondents represent preliminary trends that can inform future large-scale investigations.**

Participants were undergraduate students aged 18–24 from diverse academic backgrounds and varying levels of digital engagement.

#### **C. Measures**

The study utilized a structured questionnaire comprising multiple psychological and behavioral measures. Each construct was assessed using multiple items to ensure clarity and reliability. All responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), a widely adopted method in behavioral research.

##### **1. Active Social Media Use**

This measure assessed purposeful and interactive online engagement, including posting updates, messaging peers, sharing content, and participating in discussions. Five items captured the extent of students' active involvement.

##### **2. Passive Social Media Use**

Passive use was measured through items reflecting non-interactive behaviors such as silent scrolling, browsing posts, and observing content without reacting. These items captured the degree of content consumption without engagement.

##### **3. Loneliness Scale**

The loneliness scale assessed emotional isolation and perceived deficiencies in meaningful social relationships. Items addressed both social and emotional dimensions of loneliness.

##### **4. Social Connection Scale**

This scale measured perceived belongingness, interpersonal bonding, and levels of social support experienced across online and offline networks.

##### **5. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)**

FoMO was assessed using items that measured anxiety related to missing out on social interactions, events, or online updates. The items also captured compulsive checking behaviors triggered by FoMO.

##### **6. Social Comparison**

This measure examined how frequently students compared their appearance, lifestyle, achievements, and social success with others online. Higher scores indicated stronger tendencies toward upward comparison.

##### **7. Social Media Addiction**

Social media addiction was measured through items reflecting compulsive usage patterns, difficulty managing screen time, cravings to check social platforms, and discomfort during disconnection.

## D. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and correlational statistical techniques to explore patterns of social media behavior and their associations with emotional outcomes. The analysis included:

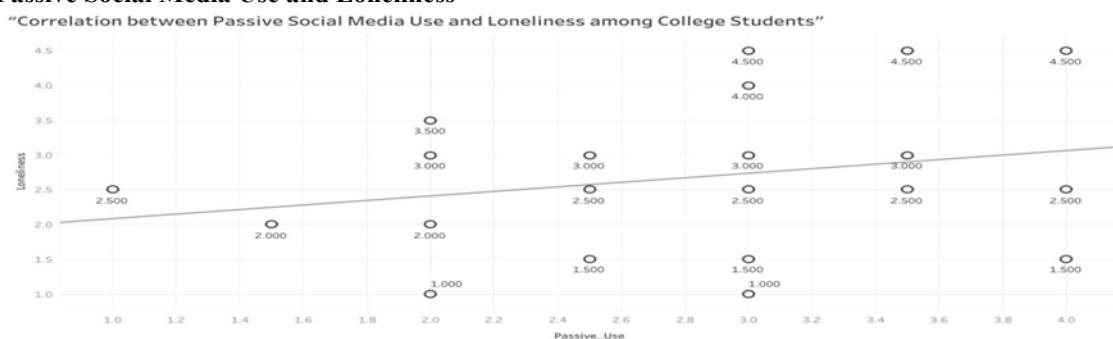
- Calculation of descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and distributions)
- Correlation analysis between key variables such as active use, passive use, loneliness, and social connection
- Development of visual representations such as pie charts, bar graphs, and scatter plots

These analytical methods enabled the identification of preliminary trends and provided empirical support for the study's conceptual framework.

## VI. Results And Data Analysis

This section presents the findings derived from the primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 30 college students. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to examine the relationship between patterns of social media use and associated psychological outcomes. The results are presented through graphical visualizations and interpreted in alignment with the study's objectives.

### A. Passive Social Media Use and Loneliness

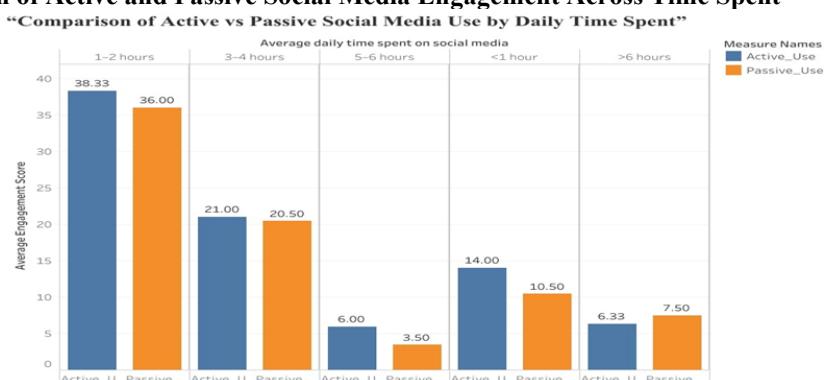


**Figure 2: Correlation between passive social media use and loneliness among college students.**

Source: Primary data collected through questionnaire survey (N = 30).

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between passive social media use and perceived loneliness. The scatter plot reveals a positive correlation, suggesting that higher levels of non-interactive engagement—such as silent scrolling, browsing without reacting, and continuous content consumption—are associated with increased feelings of emotional isolation. These findings support the theoretical assumption that passive exposure to idealized online content heightens vulnerability to upward social comparison and emotional detachment. The result is consistent with prior research indicating that non-interactive digital consumption reduces perceived social belonging and increases psychological distress.

### B. Comparison of Active and Passive Social Media Engagement Across Time Spent



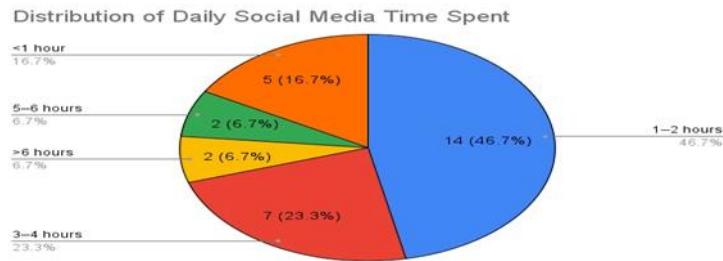
**Figure 3: Comparison of average active and passive social media usage across different daily time-spent categories.**

Source: Primary data collected through questionnaire survey (N = 30).

Figure 3 compares levels of active and passive usage across different daily time-spent categories. The results indicate that students who engage for 1–2 hours per day display relatively higher active involvement, whereas those who exceed 3–4 hours show a shift toward predominantly passive behavior. Active interaction tends to decline with extended usage duration, while passive consumption increases substantially.

This pattern suggests that prolonged exposure leads to reduced meaningful engagement and a tendency toward habitual content consumption. The findings align with literature describing digital fatigue and declining purposeful interaction as screen time increases.

### C. Distribution of Daily Social Media Usage Pattern



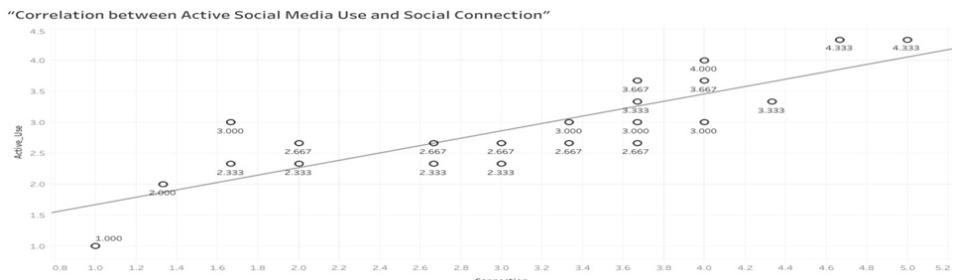
**Figure 4: Distribution of daily time spent on social media among college students.**

Source: Primary data collected through questionnaire survey (N = 30).

Figure 4 presents the distribution of daily time spent on social media. A large proportion of students (46.7%) reported using social media for 1–2 hours per day, followed by 23.3% who used it for 3–4 hours. Smaller segments of the sample reported less than 1 hour (16.7%), 5–6 hours (6.7%), and more than 6 hours (6.7%) of daily usage.

This distribution indicates that while moderate usage is common, a notable minority engages in extended screen time. High daily usage may be indicative of addictive patterns, reduced attention span, and increased susceptibility to emotional exhaustion.

### D. Active Social Media Use and Social Connection



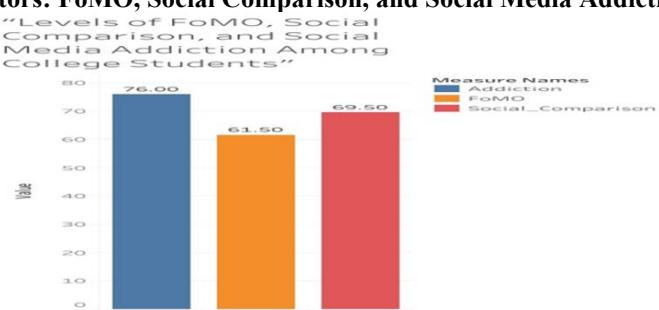
**Figure 5: Correlation between active social media use and perceived social connection among college students.**

Source: Primary data collected through questionnaire survey (N = 30).

Figure 5 demonstrates a positive correlation between active social media engagement and perceived social connection. The upward trend suggests that students who actively message, comment, share posts, and participate in discussions report stronger feelings of belongingness and interpersonal support.

This finding supports one of the central propositions of this study: that active, purposeful digital engagement fosters relational closeness and enhances psychosocial well-being. Unlike passive use, active participation reinforces social integration and peer bonding.

### E. Psychological Indicators: FoMO, Social Comparison, and Social Media Addiction



**Figure 6: Average levels of FoMO, social comparison, and social media addiction among college students.**

Source: Primary data collected through questionnaire survey (N = 30).

Figure 6 displays the average levels of FoMO, social comparison, and social media addiction among respondents. Social media addiction exhibited the highest scores, followed by social comparison and FoMO.

These results suggest that many students experience compulsive digital habits and psychological pressure to remain socially updated. Elevated social comparison points to heightened vulnerability to self-esteem fluctuations, while moderate FoMO scores indicate anxiety associated with missing out on peer activities and online interactions.

The findings highlight these psychological constructs as significant mediating factors that amplify the negative emotional impact of excessive or passive engagement.

#### **F. Summary of Key Findings**

Across all visual analyses, clear patterns emerge:

- Passive social media use is associated with higher loneliness.
- Active use enhances perceived social connection.
- Excessive time spent online correlates with increased passive behavior.
- Psychological factors—FoMO, social comparison, and addiction—play a central role in shaping emotional outcomes.

These trends support the study's conceptual framework and reinforce the connection–isolation paradox observed among college students.

### **VII. Discussion**

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into the dual effects of social media use among college students. Consistent with prior research, the results demonstrate that **active, purposeful engagement**—such as messaging, commenting, and participating in online discussions—is positively associated with social connection and emotional well-being. In contrast, **passive consumption** and **compulsive, addictive behaviors** show a clear relationship with increased loneliness, heightened FoMO, and elevated social comparison tendencies. These patterns reinforce the connection–isolation paradox identified in earlier studies.

The results align strongly with **Social Capital Theory**, which asserts that interactive communication strengthens trust, bonding, and peer support. Active social media use appears to facilitate the development of bridging and bonding social capital, enabling students to maintain meaningful connections and access emotional support.

Conversely, the findings also reflect principles of the **Compensatory Internet Use Theory**, which suggests that individuals may turn to digital environments to cope with offline emotional deficits. Students demonstrating higher levels of addiction, passive scrolling, and FoMO may be using social media as a compensatory mechanism, inadvertently increasing their exposure to idealized content and reinforcing emotional insecurities.

Importantly, the discussion reveals that the paradoxical outcomes associated with social media use are **behavior-driven rather than platform-specific**. The same platform can generate either connection or isolation depending on how students engage with it and the psychological motives underlying their behavior. This finding underscores the need to shift academic and institutional focus from restricting platform usage to **promoting healthier engagement patterns**.

The results of this study contribute to existing literature in three key ways:

1. They **highlight the simultaneous presence of positive and negative outcomes within a single behavioral framework**, rather than treating these as separate research domains.
2. They **provide preliminary evidence from an Indian college student population**, addressing an underexplored demographic in global digital well-being research.
3. They **incorporate FoMO, social comparison, and addiction as central mediators**, offering a more integrated understanding of emotional pathways than many earlier studies.

Overall, this study emphasizes that healthy digital engagement requires self-awareness, emotional regulation, and mindful usage practices. Educational institutions can play a vital role by promoting digital well-being workshops, providing mental health resources, and guiding students toward active—not passive—forms of online interaction.

### **VIII. Limitations And Future Research**

This study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the literature review is restricted to English-language publications from 2020 to 2025, which may have excluded foundational or region-specific studies outside this timeframe. Second, the primary data were collected from a relatively small sample of 30 Indian college students, which limits the statistical

generalizability of the results. As the survey relied on self-reported responses, the data may also be influenced by recall bias and social desirability bias.

Methodologically, the study employed a cross-sectional design and correlational analysis, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences. The conceptual framework, while theoretically grounded, has yet to be validated through large-scale empirical testing across diverse populations and cultural contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to trace changes in emotional outcomes over time and establish causality between social media behaviors and psychological effects. Studies incorporating AI-assisted behavioral analytics, digital trace data, or ecological momentary assessments (EMA) could offer more precise insights into real-time patterns of engagement. Additionally, interventions such as guided digital detox programs, emotion-focused media literacy training, and mindfulness-based digital well-being workshops should be evaluated to determine their long-term effectiveness in reducing social comparison, FoMO, and addiction tendencies.

## IX. Conclusion

This study examined how different patterns of social media use—active, passive, and compulsive—shape emotional and social outcomes among college students aged 18–24. By integrating insights from recent literature with primary data collected from 30 respondents, the study demonstrates that the psychological impact of social media is determined more by how students engage with digital platforms than by the overall amount of time they spend online.

The findings indicate that **active and purposeful engagement** enhances communication, belongingness, and interpersonal trust, thereby supporting emotional well-being. In contrast, **passive consumption and addictive behaviors** are associated with increased loneliness, heightened FoMO, greater social comparison tendencies, and signs of emotional exhaustion. These results reinforce the connection–isolation paradox, showing that the same platforms capable of fostering connection can also contribute to psychological strain when used unmindfully.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by simultaneously analyzing the positive and negative dimensions of social media engagement within a unified framework and by offering preliminary evidence from an underrepresented demographic—Indian college students. The findings highlight the importance of promoting digital self-regulation, emotional awareness, and healthier online habits among young adults.

Ultimately, the study concludes that social media itself is not inherently beneficial or harmful. Rather, its impact depends on users' intentions, behaviors, and emotional motivations. When approached mindfully, social media has the potential to strengthen human connection, support mental well-being, and enrich the social experiences of college students.

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