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The Relationship Among Social Media, Interpersonal Relationships,
and Self-Conscious Emotions

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship among social media, interpersonal relationships, and self-conscious emotions. Participants responded to surveys that were distributed on Facebook and through email. The participants varied in age, gender, and ethnicity. Each participant responded to a four-part online survey. The survey contained the following scales: TOSCA (assesses the self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt proneness), Social Media Use (measures the usage of social media of the individual), and Dispositional Authenticity and Relationship Authenticity (measures interpersonal relationship). These three variables were analyzed quantitatively and compared to find significant negative correlations.

Keywords: social media, Facebook, Instagram, interpersonal relationships, romantic relationships, self-conscious emotions, shame, guilt

The Relationship Among Social Media, Interpersonal Relationships,
and Self-Conscious Emotions

Social media is recognized as a source of modern communication that highlights the thoughts and emotions of individuals when they post. There has been clear evidence to suggest both positive and negative effects of social media on emotions. Furthermore, as communication is a vital aspect of relationships, many studies have shown that social media has both positive and negative effects on a relationship. Although social media has built positive connections with individuals, there was clear evidence to support the barriers social media and technology built among family relationships, though not as much among friend relationships.

Researchers have discovered that different types of social media influence self-conscious emotions. The self-conscious emotions that will be examined in this study are shame and guilt. Individuals have mistakenly confused shame with guilt, but there is clear difference. To briefly explain, shame involves a negative view of one's self which could lead to feelings of mistrust and worthlessness. However, guilt is a feeling of regret for perceived wrongdoing or offense. Tracy et. al. (2007) defined shame as involving persistent negative feelings of an individual's overall self, whereas guilt involves negative feelings about a behavior acted upon by an individual. The majority of researchers found it challenging to discern both the positive and negative effects of self-conscious emotions, hence there was difficulty in reaching a consensus. Individuals need to have positive interactions with other individuals to counteract some of the negative results that social media has on self-conscious emotions.

Kim and Stavrositu (2018) found that experiencing negative emotions through Facebook could produce positive results in an individual's well-being and, vice versa, positive emotions

could produce negative results. Vermeulen et. al. (2018) discovered that adolescents experience both shame and guilt when posting about their emotions on various social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Furthermore, they found that when teens believed that they were posting “too much”, they felt as if they were “annoying,” resulting in feelings of shame. The researchers also stated, “Both the quantity and the content of posts (e.g. those that are weird and unnecessary, shameful, or too personal or emotional, such as very sad or depressive) also generated feelings of vicarious shame...” (p. 214). Lup et. al. (2015) found an association between social media use and social comparison which could result in guilt.

Not only do the emotions of an individual affect their behavior through social media but also their interpersonal relationships. “Interpersonal relationships” can be defined as deep associations between two or more individuals. Moreover, there are different types of relationships such as: friend, family, and romantic relationships. One source suggested that adolescents not only have increased effective communication with their friends through text messages rather than with family, but also through various forms of social media sites (Vermeulen et. al., 2018). Different types of social networks have forms of messaging similar to text messaging (i.e. Facebook instant messenger, Snapchat “chat”, etc.) Most individuals reported having satisfied friend relationships from social media; however, dissatisfaction can arise from these friend relationships when there is comparison among romantic relationships. Hanna et. al (2017) found through Facebook that not only are there negative effects among romantic relationships but also with an individual’s self-conscious emotions.

Research literature has shed light on social media’s impact on emotions; however, the aspect of how social media has impacted interpersonal relationships has been less considered.

Thus, this study explores each of these variables to find plausible correlations and to better understand the implications and impact of social media usage on interpersonal interactions, self-conscious emotions, and relationships among modern individuals. For the most part, contemporary society has not stopped to consider the full ramifications of social media usage on self-conscious emotions and interpersonal relationships. Constructive examination of research from many groups confirms the influence that social media has had on communication patterns, self-conscious emotions and interpersonal relationships. This study sought to explore each of these variables in search of plausible correlations among them.

One group of researchers found that Facebook was associated with low self-esteem and increased self-objectification (Hanna, E., Ward, L. M., Seabrook, R. C., Jerald, M., Reed, L., Giaccardi, S., & Lippman, J. R. 2017). They also noted positive and negative effects were evident among family, friend, and romantic types of relationships. Furthermore, Goodman-Deane, Mieczakowski, Johnson, Goldhaber, and Clarkson (2016) examined how technology effects family relationships, specifically extended family and stated, "...persistent use of cell phones (but not computers) was associated with negative work-family spillover, higher distress, and lower family satisfaction". This group explored different aspects of social media's effects on family relationships, specifically extended family. Goodman-Deane et. al. also observed that sending text messages was negatively correlated with both the immediate and extended relationships, revealing dissatisfaction from communicating via text message compared to "face-to-face" communication. However, in the same year, Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, and Young (2016) discovered that the social media app, Snapchat, was used as a more personalized communicative device for sending text messages between teenagers and their families.

“Text messaging [specifically messaging within social media platforms] shows a negative association with family relationships, but not friendships” (Goodman-Deane, et. al., 2016, p. 226). For example, Vaterlaus et. al. (2016) mentioned that young adult participants said they used Snapchat to strengthen their relationships among their social/friend relationships. Goodman-Deane et. al. (2016) measured the variables of “close friends” and “distant friends”. Regarding “close friends”, the researchers found that middle-aged individuals had more satisfaction in close friendships communicating face-to-face and through video calls when compared to the youngest age group. In contrast, regarding “distant friends”, these researchers found that the oldest participant age group had higher satisfaction with distant relationships through technology than the younger group.

“In Western cultures, previous offline research indicates that social comparisons with friends’ dating relationships are common and these comparisons affect relationship satisfaction” (Morry, M. M., Sucharyna, T. A., & Petty, S. K. 2018, p.141). Morry et. al (2018) found an issue of social comparison among romantic relationships when viewing other individual’s profiles through sites such as Facebook. Individuals in romantic relationships had experienced anxiety, lower self-esteem, and lower overall satisfaction in their relationships when considering social comparison through media.

Kim and Stavrositu (2018) found that experiencing negative emotions through Facebook could produce positive results in an individual’s well-being and, vice versa, positive emotions could produce negative results (2018). Vermeulen et. al. (2018) discovered that adolescents experience both shame and guilt when posting about their emotions on various social media sites (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Furthermore, they found that when teens

believed that they were posting “too much”, they felt as if they were “annoying,” resulting in feelings of shame. The researchers also stated, “Both the quantity and the content of posts (e.g. those that are weird and unnecessary, shameful, or too personal or emotional, such as very sad or depressive) also generated feelings of vicarious shame...” (p. 214). Lup et. al. (2015) found an association between social media use and social comparison which could result in guilt.

Shame and guilt are both examples of self-conscious emotions that are recognized among a diverse group of studies (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007). In a study conducted by Vermeulen, Vandebosch, and Heirman (2018), teenagers were interviewed about their experiences with sharing positive and negative emotions through social media outlets, which revealed that adolescents used words pertaining to self-conscious emotions such as “shame” or “guilt” when asked about the experience of posting on either Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. Another study suggested that, “...Facebook use has been associated with increased feelings of stress and social overload, lower self-esteem, loneliness, and depression” (Lup, K., Trub, L., & Rosenthal, L., 2015, p. 247). Tracy et. al. (2007) also mentioned that many theories claimed that shame was directly linked to challenges with creating positive relationships with others and making positive impressions on others. Another study revealed that sharing emotions was important for dealing with emotions, and feedback from others was necessary for individuals (Vermeulen et. al., 2018). Pertaining to the self-conscious emotion of guilt, Tracy et. al. (2007) stated that guilt can be associated with “antisocial” behaviors and that, conversely, lack of interpersonal relationships may cause guilt for an individual.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that there is an association between interpersonal relationships, social media, and the self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt. It was also hypothesized that increased levels of social media usage would positively correlate with increased felt levels of guilt/shame among the respondents.

Methodology

This research was conducted as a quasi-experimental quantitative study that measured the relationship among social media usage, interpersonal relationships, and self-conscious emotions. Surveys were constructed through Google Forms. Four surveys: Social Media Usage Survey, Dispositional Authenticity Scale AUT3 (Kernis), Relationship Authenticity Scale (AIRS-37), and TOSCA-3 (Test of Self-Conscious Affect) were combined into one survey. All participants received the same questions; however, the survey questions had been randomized in three different orders. For example, 1. Social Media, Interpersonal Relationships, and TOSCA; 2. Interpersonal Relationships, TOSCA, and Social Media; 3. TOSCA, Social Media, and Interpersonal Relationships. When the data was collected, it was analyzed by running a bivariate correlation through SPSS (Statistical Analysis Software) data tool.

The surveys were distributed through the social media site, Facebook and were also collected from the researcher's mentor, Dr. Jeremiah Sullins' summer psychology class, yielding forty-seven respondents total (N=47). Thus, the demographics of the participants varied in age, ethnicity, and gender.

Results

Forty-seven (N=47) survey responses were received and analyzed. The most significant finding was that increased social media usage across various platforms directly correlates with decreased levels of reported guilt. There were seven significant correlations found in this study. There was a negative correlation between guilt and the use of Instagram ($r(47) = -.459, p=.001$) (see Appendix C); a significant negative correlation with guilt proneness and how many times an individual sent or received Snapchats ($r(47) = -.558, p=.000$) (see Appendix D); a negative correlation between how many posts were read and received through Twitter and the total guilt score ($r(47) = -.438, p=.002$) (see Appendix E); and a significant negative correlation between total guilt proneness and how many times an individual would use a social media site not listed in the survey ($r(47) = -.513, p=.000$) (see Appendix F). There was a significant negative correlation between the total score of interpersonal relationships and how many days an individual checked their social media ($r(43) = -.299, p=.046$) (see Appendix G). A significant negative correlation was found between how many times an individual liked, commented, or posted and the total score of shame proneness ($r(44) = -.340, p=0.026$) (see Appendix H). The last correlation was presented as an anomaly by resulting in a significant positive correlation for guilt proneness and how many times an individual would like, comment, or post ($r(45) = .309, p=.039$) (see Appendix I).

Discussion

The literature reviewed had indicated that self-conscious emotions, like shame and guilt were positively correlated with social media usage. The results of this study contradicted the reviewed research, finding rather negative correlations between using various platforms of social

media and guilt proneness. “By and large” those with lower guilt and shame proneness are the ones that are using social media. In other words, individuals (survey respondents) that are likely to experience guilt and shame in everyday situations are the ones that tend not to be on or use social media as much. An increase in checking of social media was found to be related to lower interpersonal relationship scores. Lastly, there were no significant relationships discovered between self-conscious emotions and interpersonal relationships. Essentially shame and guilt proneness were not found significant when associated authenticity within a romantic relationship.

One limitations in this study was the restricted time of two months to completion. The data collection might have been skewed due to the interpersonal relationship scale that was utilized. For instance, there was an individual who was unable to complete the survey because they were not in a romantic relationship. Another limitation was the fact that the survey was administered through the social media outlet of Facebook, which could have led to results that were skewed.

For further research, it would be helpful to expand the variables by finding a scale that would measure other relationships besides romantic types of relationships. It would also be important to administer the survey outside of social media outlets. Analyzing the additional variables of age, ethnicity, gender, etc. in correlation with social media usage, self-conscious emotions, and interpersonal relationships could produce significant and pertinent findings.

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Appendix A

Significant Negative Correlations of Guilt

		Total_Guilt	Use Instagram (Social Media)	Send or receive Snapchats (Social Media)	Post or read tweets on Twitter (Social Media)	Visit another social media site that is not listed (Social Media)	Overall, how often do you post, comment, or "like" things on your own or someone else's social networking site? (Social Media)	About how many times a day do you check your social networking sites? (Social Media)
Total_Guilt	Pearson Correlation	1	-.459**	-.558**	-.438**	-.513**	-.274	.309 [†]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000	.002	.000	.143	.039
	N	47	47	47	47	47	30	45
Use Instagram (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	-.459**	1	.566**	.320 [*]	.432**	-.043	-.100
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.000	.028	.002	.820	.515
	N	47	47	47	47	47	30	45
Send or receive Snapchats (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	-.558**	.566**	1	.378**	.321 [*]	-.049	-.406**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.009	.028	.798	.006
	N	47	47	47	47	47	30	45
Post or read tweets on Twitter (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	-.438**	.320 [*]	.378**	1	.211	.196	-.317 [†]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.028	.009		.154	.299	.034
	N	47	47	47	47	47	30	45
Visit another social media site that is not listed (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	-.513**	.432**	.321 [*]	.211	1	-.115	-.262
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002	.028	.154		.545	.082
	N	47	47	47	47	47	30	45
Overall, how often do you post, comment, or "like" things on your own or someone else's social networking site? (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	-.274	-.043	-.049	.196	-.115	1	.359
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.143	.820	.798	.299	.545		.051
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
About how many times a day do you check your social networking sites? (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	.309 [†]	-.100	-.406**	-.317 [†]	-.262	.359	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.039	.515	.006	.034	.082	.051	
	N	45	45	45	45	45	30	45

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix B

Significant Negative Correlations of Shame and Interpersonal Relationships

		About how many times a day do you post, comment, or "like" things on your own or someone else's social media site? (Social Media)	About how many times a day do you check your social networking sites? (Social Media)	Total_Interpersonal	Total_Shame
About how many times a day do you post, comment, or "like" things on your own or someone else's social media site? (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	1	.850**	-.207	-.340*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.178	.026
	N	44	44	44	43
About how many times a day do you check your social networking sites? (Social Media)	Pearson Correlation	.850**	1	-.299*	-.251
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.046	.101
	N	44	45	45	44
Total_Interpersonal	Pearson Correlation	-.207	-.299*	1	.251
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.178	.046		.096
	N	44	45	47	45
Total_Shame	Pearson Correlation	-.340*	-.251	.251	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026	.101	.096	
	N	43	44	45	45

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix C

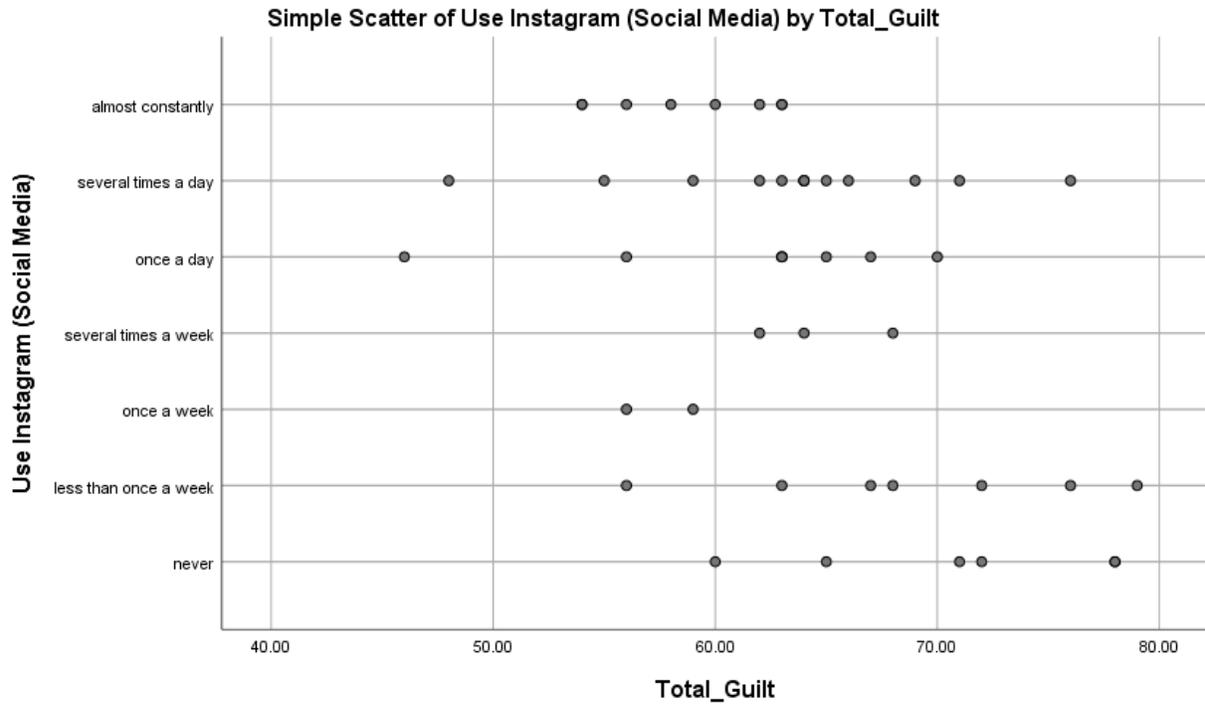


Figure 1

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total guilt proneness score with how many times an individual uses Instagram.

Appendix D

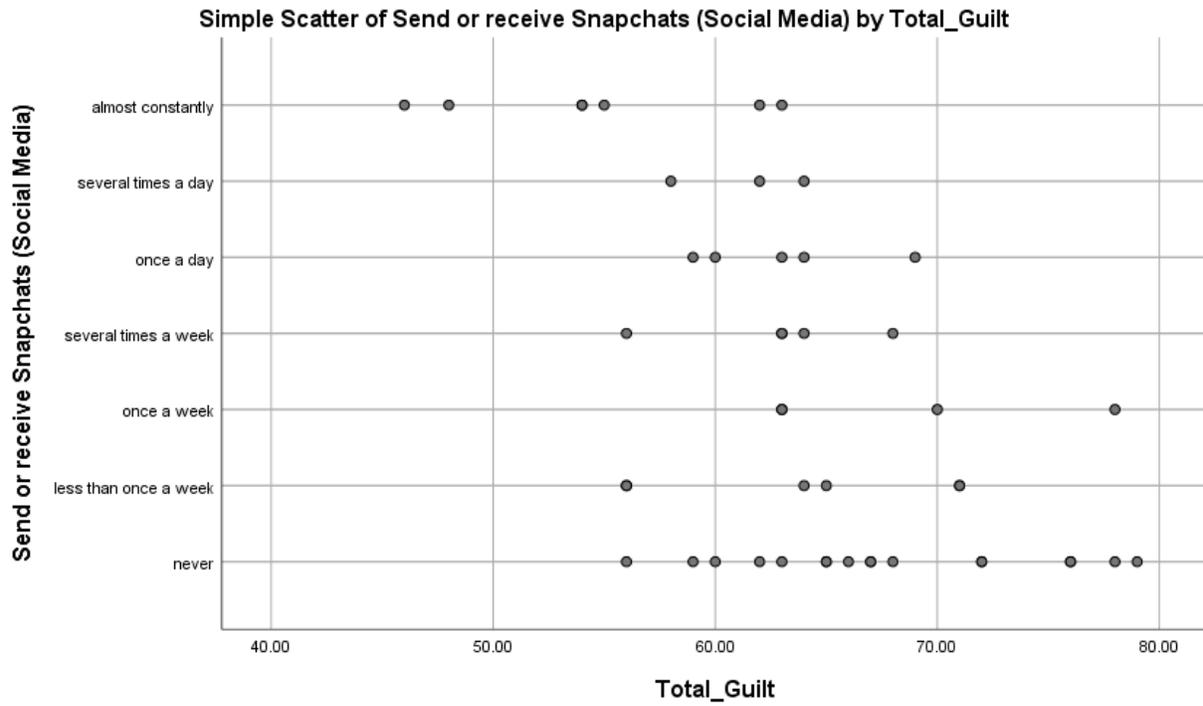


Figure 2

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total guilt proneness score with how many times an individual would send or receive Snapchats.

Appendix E

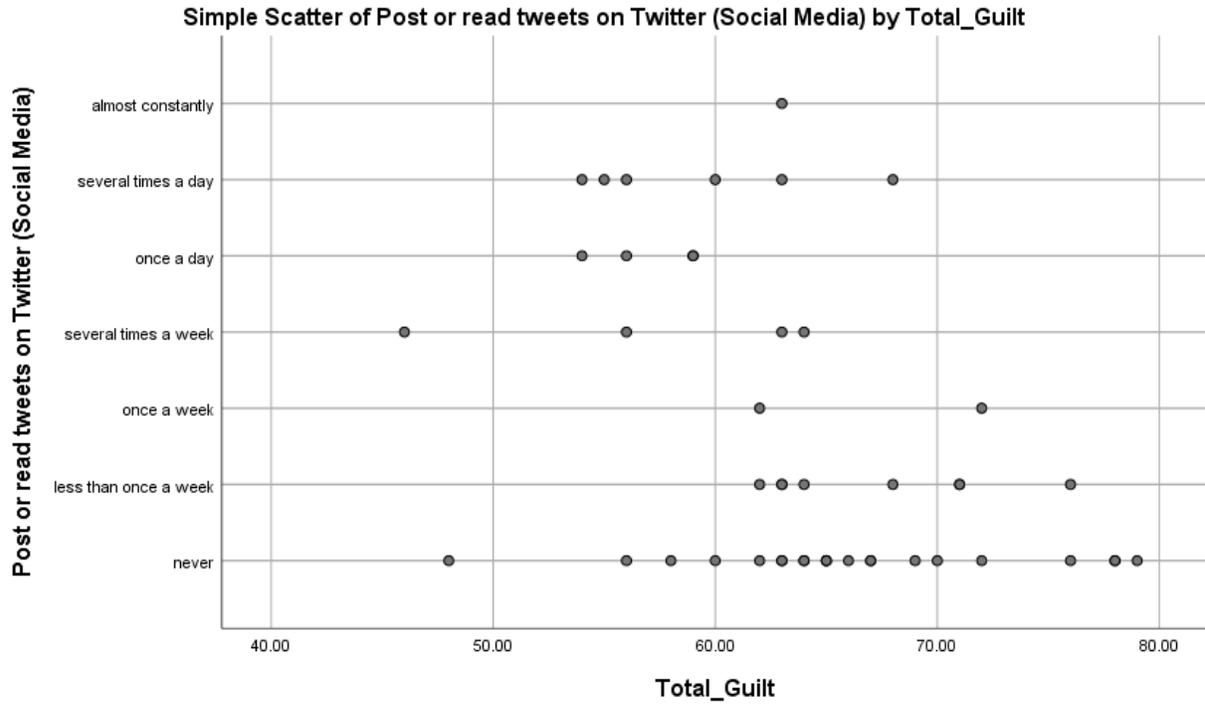


Figure 3

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total guilt proneness score with how many times an individual would post or read tweets on Twitter.

Appendix F

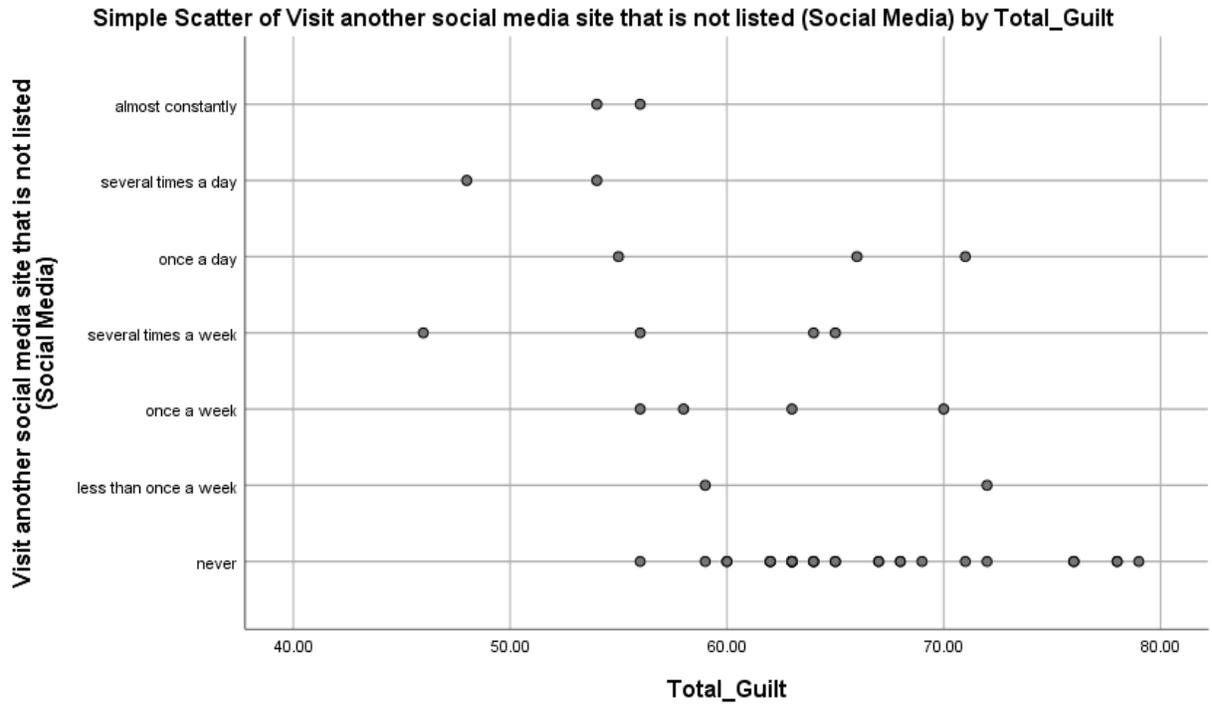


Figure 4

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total guilt proneness score with how many times an individual would visit another social media site that was not listed in the survey.

Appendix G

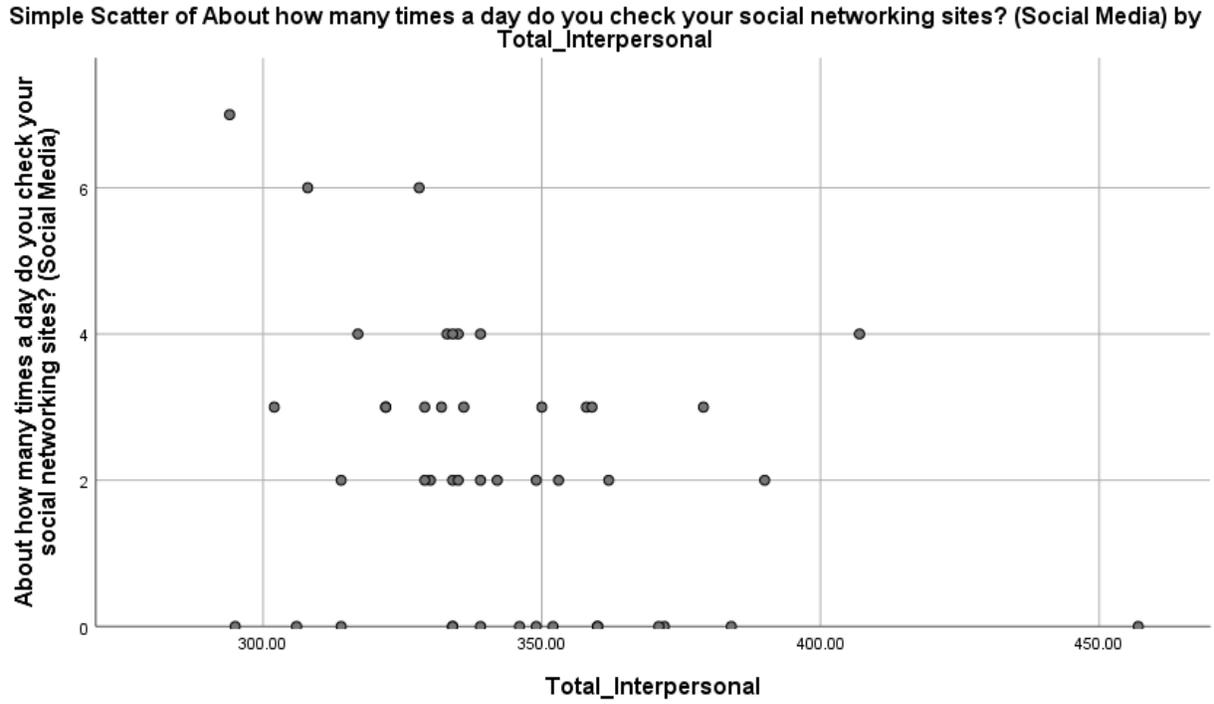


Figure 5

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total interpersonal relationship score with how many times a day an individual would check their social media.

Appendix H

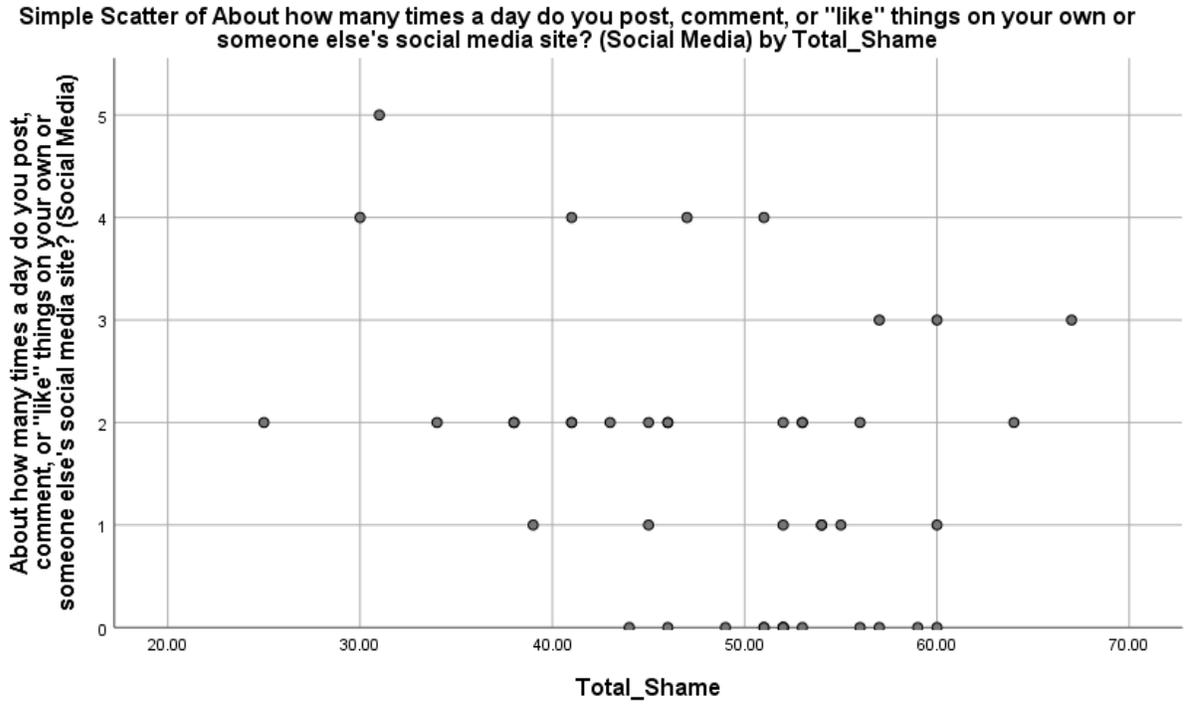


Figure 6

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total shame proneness score with how many time a day an individual would post, comment, or “like” things on another individual’s social media account.

Appendix I

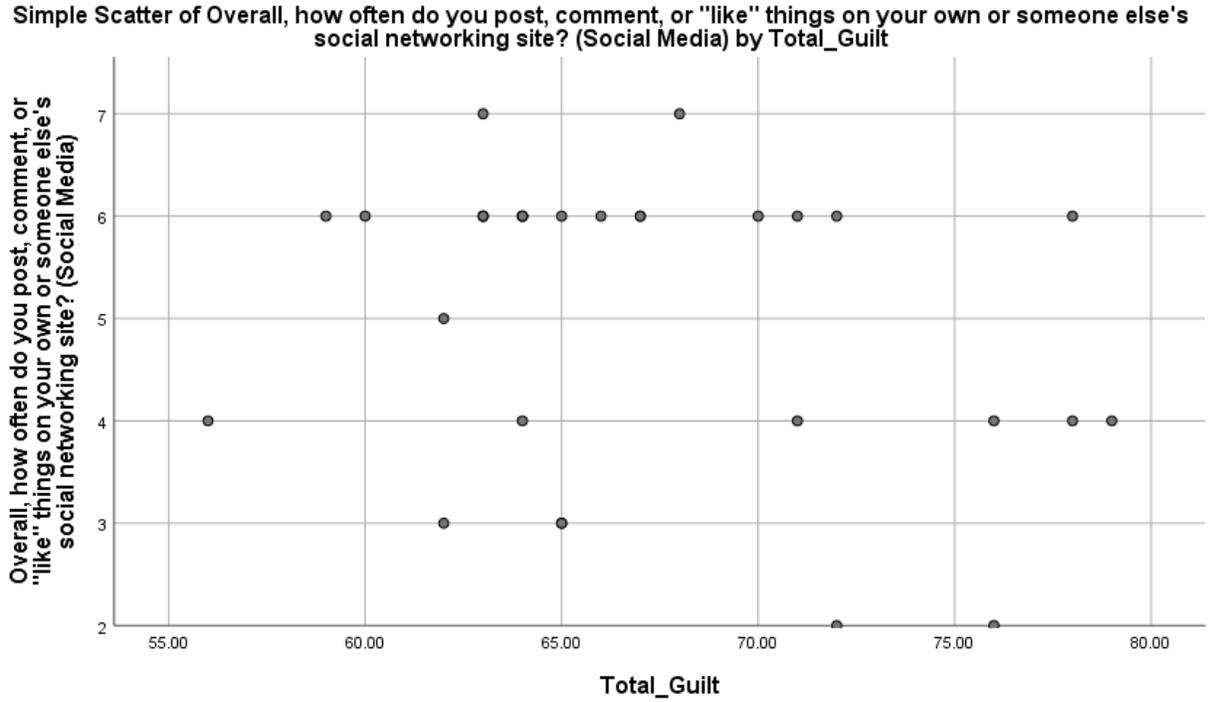


Figure 7

This scatterplot reveals a correlation between the total guilt proneness score with how often an individual would post, comment, or “like” things on another individual’s social media account.