

# Lost in a sea of highlight reels: The use of social media and mental health metaphors in online health blogs

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**Abstract** – This article explores the metaphorical conceptualisation of social media and its relationship with mental health and well-being in a specialised corpus of online health blogs, with the aim of discovering how people communicate their experience of social media use, and whether it has a positive or negative influence in their lives. For this purpose, a 20,000-word corpus of blog posts from online health communities, charities and personal blogs were collected and analysed. The main research questions are: a) How is social media conceptualised? b) Are metaphors used to conceptualise social media evaluative? c) How are mental health and well-being conceptualised? d) How are metaphors used to discuss the benefits and challenges of social media use for individuals who suffer from illness? Results show that the DRUGS, PLACE, PATH and FOOD source domains are used to conceptualise social media, and that metaphor is used to highlight both the positive impact of social media in providing social support and its negative impact on symptoms when used excessively.

**Keywords** – social media; metaphor; mental health; well-being; evaluation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The influence of social media on mental health and well-being is currently a highly controversial issue, as some people claim it is detrimental to their mental health while others say it plays a vital role in their daily lives. Despite being widely studied in fields such as psychology and anthropology (Keles *et al.* 2020; Miller *et al.* 2021), few studies have investigated how this topic is communicated through linguistic choices in real world data, such as blogs or mediated communication (for exceptions, see Naslund *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, while studies on the evaluative potential of metaphor have frequently demonstrated that metaphor is an extremely useful tool in the communication of severe mental disorders (Coll-Florit and Climent 2022), mental illnesses (Semino 2008; Charteris-Black 2012), and diseases such as cancer (Semino *et al.* 2018), little research exists on the relationship between social media and mental health.



Against this background, this study aims to analyse how social media is conceptualised in a specialised corpus of blog posts from online health communities, mental health charities, and mental health bloggers. Furthermore, it also aims to discover whether the evaluative potential of metaphor is used when discussing the benefits and challenges of social media use, and whether people view social media as a positive or negative influence on their mental health and well-being. To achieve these aims, I will address the following four research questions:

RQ1: How is social media conceptualised in terms of the target domains a) social media platforms, b) social media content, and c) social media use?

RQ2: Are metaphors used to conceptualise social media target domains evaluative? If so, what is the predominant value?

RQ3: How are mental health and well-being conceptualised?

RQ4: How are metaphors used to discuss the benefits and challenges of social media use for individuals who suffer from illness?

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the background to the study while Section 3 discusses the data and methodology used. Section 4 presents the qualitative and quantitative results from the data by using descriptive statistics. Finally, Section 5 offers some conclusions and addresses the limitations of the study and areas for future research.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### *2.1. Conceptual metaphor theory and the evaluative function of metaphor*

This study is grounded in conceptual metaphor theory (henceforth, CMT), which views metaphors as tools to communicate complex and abstract entities or ideas in terms of more concrete and tangible ones (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). During this process, real or perceived qualities and attributes of a source domain are mapped onto a target domain, “so that we can see, experience, think and communicate about one thing in terms of another” (Demjén and Semino 2017: 1). As well as facilitating communication by helping people to explain complex experiences, metaphors also carry out an evaluative function by highlighting certain aspects of target domains while, at the same time, backgrounding others (Semino 2021: 51).

In her corpus study, Deignan (2010: 363) identifies “four mechanisms that speakers use to evaluate through metaphor: creating entailments, exploiting scenarios, choosing significant source domains, and mapping connotational meaning.” The evaluative potential of metaphor has recently been demonstrated in several analyses, such as in Porto’s (2022) investigation on the use of WATER metaphors in the Spanish press to discuss Syrian migration, Hidalgo-Downing and Pérez-Sobrino’s (2023) study on Brexit metaphors in British newspapers, and Fuoli *et al.*’s (2022) examination of metaphors in a corpus film reviews.

## 2.2. *Social media and metaphor*

To date, little research exists on the metaphorical representation of social media, which is surprising considering its abstract nature. Social media platforms carry out several functions which provide a rich site for the production of metaphor, such as communicating with others, uploading and sharing content, taking part in online events, and participating in online communities.

Among research carried out on real world data, i.e., data generated without researcher interference, a recent study by Foley and Hidalgo-Downing (2024) found that journalists in a 10,000-word sample of British newspaper opinion articles employed the PERSON, PLACE, DRUGS, OBJECT, WAR, COMPETITION and JOURNEY source domains to conceptualise social media platforms and their use. In addition, le Roux and Parry (2020: 189) suggest potential metaphors that may be used when discussing social media use and its effect on mental health and well-being, which are based on metaphors they frequently utilised in seminars and lectures, e.g., *Social media is a Townsquare*.

Regarding digital environments, Girón-García and Esbrí-Blasco (2019) demonstrate that cultural knowledge about supermarkets influences the conceptualisation of digital frames, such as *Amazon* ‘departments’, and regarding digital society, Katzenbach and Larsson (2017) provide a dossier of articles that examine the implications of using certain metaphors that ‘pervade’ discussions on digital transformation in politics, culture, and economics. Finally, and perhaps more relevant to this study, previous research on the use of metaphor in the conceptualisation of the internet has revealed that metaphors change and evolve along with technology, e.g. The ‘information superhighway’ metaphor of the early 1990s that conceptualised the sharing and receiving

of information online has now become obsolete, as the internet, and thus social media, has become a place that provides opportunities for people to build communities and gather online (Isomursu *et al.* 2007).

### *2.3. Mental health, illness and metaphor*

Given the extensive amount of research carried out in the field of CMT in the past decade on the metaphorical representation of illness, both mental and physical, it is surprising that social media's effect on mental health has not yet been addressed. Research on the use of metaphor in the communication of mental illness (Semino 2008; Charteris-Black 2012; El Refaie 2014; Tay 2017; Coll-Florit *et al.* 2021; Forceville and Paling 2021) has demonstrated that metaphor is an invaluable tool when communicating the difficult and subjective experience of living with mental illness. Furthermore, recent studies on the use of metaphor for the emotional experiences of pregnancy loss (Littlemore and Turner 2019) and living with advanced-stage cancer (Semino *et al.* 2018) have provided healthcare practitioners with insights and best care practices to support people through this difficult time.

### *2.4. Social media use, mental health, well-being and blogging*

Currently, there is a vast amount of research available on the relationship between social media use, mental health and well-being. However, as this relationship is a highly complex and nuanced one, researchers and psychologists have investigated this topic from various perspectives and approaches, leading to conflicting results. A systematic review of the literature on social media's influence on depression and anxiety in adolescents (Keles *et al.* 2020: 90) found that while it is "fair to say that there is an 'association' between social media use and mental health problems," concerns were raised regarding the cross-sectional nature of the studies, which were mostly quantitative rather than qualitative.

Similarly, a meta-analysis carried out on the conceptual and operational approaches to computer-mediated communication and mental health (Meier and Reinecke 2020: 32) found that although results "suggest an overall (very) small negative association between social media use and mental health," more rigorous approaches are needed, i.e., studies must assess the quality of social media use rather than the quantity. Finally, in a review

of the literature on social media use and well-being, Kross *et al.* (2021) arrive at a similar conclusion, calling for more experimental and longitudinal studies rather than cross-sectional ones, as well as a validation of the methodologies (self-report questionnaires) that are used to study social media's impact on well-being. Ultimately, Kross *et al.* (2021) highlight that social media's influence on well-being depends on both how and why people use it.

Despite the extensive research available on social media use and mental health and well-being, less research exists on the use of social media by those who suffer from serious mental illness, such as bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia and major depressive disorders. Naslund *et al.* (2020) provide a summary of the current research on the use of social media by individuals who suffer from mental illness, which also takes into account social media's impact on well-being. Of particular interest to this study is the identification of benefits and risks of social media use for individuals with mental illness. (For a detailed list of these benefits and challenges, see Naslund *et al.* 2020: 247).

The benefits include:

- 1) Facilitating social interaction: Individuals living with mental illness are at increased risk of social isolation due to impaired social functioning, as well as symptoms which may prevent or cause difficulties with face-to-face interactions. Social media facilitates social interaction as online communication does not require an immediate response or the use of non-verbal cues. Furthermore, people who suffer from mental illness may have less access to social support outside of family members or health care practitioners (Brusilovskiy *et al.* 2016), and social media helps them feel less socially isolated as they can interact with peers and access other social groups.
- 2) Access to peer support network: Online peer support provides opportunities for those with mental illness to share and receive strategies for coping with illness, as well as the ability to establish relationships and receive support from those who suffer from similar experiences.

The challenges involve:

- 1) Impact on symptoms: Studies have shown that prolonged or heavy use of social media can contribute to an increase in the symptoms of mental health and negatively affect well-being. For example, negative comparison on social

media was found to contribute to “risk of rumination and subsequent increases in depression symptoms” (Naslund *et al.* 2020: 249). Similarly, symptoms of anxiety are associated with prolonged social media use.

- 2) Facing hostile interactions: Individuals are at risk of being exposed to triggers or negative interactions on social media via comments or posts.

Similar to the ways in which social media use can have a positive impact on the symptoms of mental illness, by providing a site for social interaction and peer support, blogging has also been found to act as a therapeutic outlet for people who suffer from mental illness. Miller and Pole’s (2010) analysis of the content and characteristics of 951 health blogs found that many health blogs tend to focus on topics that involve stigmatising illnesses or situations, such as “mental health, reproduction, HIV/AIDS, and disabilities” (Miller and Pole 2010: 1517). They suggest that by sharing aspects of their lives that they may usually keep hidden, health bloggers may experience a therapeutic outlet or cathartic release. Similarly, Hu’s (2019) survey of 50 mental health bloggers also identified a positive therapeutic effect of blogging. By sharing their stories “to help their peers fight not only the disease, but the self-stigmatisation and fear” (Hu 2019: 118) bloggers can increase their sense of self-worth by perceiving themselves as helping others. The content and characteristics of the corpus compiled for this study appear to reinforce both Hu’s (2019) and Miller and Pole’s (2010) research, as many of the authors provide advice and coping strategies for dealing with social media’s effect on mental health and well-being, indicating that bloggers experience a therapeutic impact both from sharing their stories and helping their peers.

As well as providing a summary of the current research on metaphor, social media, and mental health, in giving the background to this study I also hope to: 1) draw attention to the practical outcomes of research on metaphor and highly emotional and complex experiences, and 2) highlight that although there is an extensive amount of research available on social media’s effect on mental health and well-being, there is a need for more studies that investigate the quality of social media use, rather than the quantity. Finally, more research is needed to discover how people who suffer from mental illness use social media, why they do so, and whether social media use improves or increases symptoms of mental illness.

### 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Data

The data for this study consists of a 20,000-word specialised corpus compiled from posts featured on online health communities (e.g. [tinybuddha.com](http://tinybuddha.com)), mental health charities (e.g., [mentalhealth.org](http://mentalhealth.org)), and personal blog pages. Although 20,000 words may seem limited in terms of data sets, this specific corpus was compiled from a larger 100,000-word corpus for the purpose of testing the annotation method and identifying source domain categories. Regarding characteristics of the specialised corpus, it includes 19 texts from 19 authors, and the majority are written in American English. As some texts were published anonymously, it is difficult to estimate the average age and gender of the authors. Eligibility criteria included the primary focus of the post being social media's effect on a form of mental illness or aspect of well-being, and the search function on websites was used to identify posts containing the keyword *social media*.

Several ethical considerations were taken into account when designing this study, especially given the fact that mental illness can be a particularly sensitive topic. The primary decision was to compile the corpus from blog posts that were easily accessible in the public domain, such as those posted on the pages of bloggers or on the websites of mental health charities and health communities (as opposed to websites, platforms, and forums for which an account or membership is required). Regarding posts from mental health charities and health communities, I only included posts published on the story or blog section of websites, as people are required to submit these posts for editorial review. I acknowledge that it may not have been authors' intention for their posts to be used for research purposes, but have understood that by engaging in this process, authors are aware that their posts will receive more visibility and reach a wider audience.

Where contact information was provided, I emailed authors to explain the purpose of the study and to inform them that any identifying information would be eliminated or changed, and in cases where posts were published anonymously, I contacted the platform moderators. I received written consent to use five posts, including one request to reference the author of the post in the study, but I did not receive a response for the remaining 12 posts. Of the twelve who did not respond, six were sourced from websites that required authors to submit their posts for editorial review in order to be published, and six were sourced from the pages of bloggers who, upon further inspection, appear to have stopped updating their blog pages.

### 3.2. Method

A three-step annotation protocol to identify metaphorically used expressions and their evaluative potential was applied to the sample, and expressions were coded using *Microsoft Excel*. To reduce annotation bias and subjectivity, the sample was annotated and coded separately by another researcher and, in cases where disagreement occurred, the annotation was revised accordingly. In this section, I will describe the process behind each step and demonstrate how it was applied by using examples from the sample.

#### 3.2.1. Identifying metaphorically used words

Steen *et al.*'s (2010) the *Metaphor Identification Protocol VU University Amsterdam* (MIPVU)<sup>1</sup> tool was used to identify linguistic metaphoric expressions that conceptualised the following target domains:

- a) Social media platforms, including software such as algorithms.
- b) Social media content, features, and forms of engagement, e.g., *likes*.
- c) Social media use, e.g., frequency of use and ways of connecting or disconnecting.
- d) Mental health and well-being, including mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety, emotions and feelings.

To identify linguistic metaphors, researchers must first read the text to gain a general understanding of the article, then reread it and identify potential metaphorically used expressions. Following this, words or expressions are coded as metaphorically used when the contextual meaning contrasts with the most basic meaning in dictionaries of reference, which were the *Macmillan*<sup>2</sup> and *Collins*<sup>3</sup> dictionaries in this case. According to Pragglejaz Group (2007: 3), the most basic meanings of words tend to be: 1) more concrete (what they evoke is easier to imagine, e.g., see, hear, feel, smell, and taste), 2) related to bodily action, and 3) more precise (as opposed to vague).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vismet.org/metcor/documentation/MIPVU.html>

<sup>2</sup> I am unable to provide the URL for entries for the Macmillan online dictionary, as the site was closed after the data had been collected and annotated. However, links to expressions from *Collins* online dictionary will be provided, as both were used to verify metaphoric expressions.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

For example, in (1), the word *place* was identified as a linguistic metaphor by comparing the contextual meaning with the most basic dictionary entry for *place* in the *Collins* dictionary, which states that “a place is any point, building, area, town or country.”<sup>4</sup> As social media is not a physical place, the contextual meaning does contrast with the most basic entry of the noun *place*, and the expression was coded as a metaphoric expression.

(1) Social media is an amazing place to connect with the world around us.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2.2. Identifying source and target domains

Once the metaphoric expression is coded, the specific source domain must be identified. In many cases, the metaphoric expression itself provided the specific source domain. For example, in (2), social media content (memes) was conceptualised as SPICY FOOD:

(2) ... spending hours liking the day’s spiciest memes.

To identify the specific target domains, it is necessary to revise the metaphoric expression in its context of use. For example, in the case of the *spiciest memes*, memes were categorised under the general target domain of SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT. Upon reviewing the metaphoric expression in its context, it was clear that not all content is conceptualised as SPICY FOOD, but only content that users spend *hours liking*, which implies that they find *spicy* memes interesting. As the third entry for *spicy* in the *Collins* online dictionary is “informal – suggestive of scandal or sensation,”<sup>6</sup> *spicy memes* were interpreted as those that are sensational or interesting. As a result, the conceptual metaphor INTERESTING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT IS SPICY FOOD was identified.

Finally, as this study is target domain-based, the general target domains of social media content, platforms, and use have already been identified, as well as the target domain of mental health and well-being. To identify ‘overarching’ or general source domains, I relied on previous research regarding metaphor and the internet, social media, mental health, and health (Isomursu *et al.* 2007; Semino *et al.* 2018; le Roux and Parry 2020 and Coll-Florit *et al.* 2021, respectively). I also relied on the *Master Metaphor List* (Lakoff *et al.* 1991) and the [MetaNet wiki](#), which are catalogues of research on metaphor

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/place>

<sup>5</sup> Nicholls, Kat. 2018. *How to Take Care of Yourself Online* (happiful.com)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/spicy>

studies that include source-target domain mappings and relevant examples. Once specific source and target domains were identified, conceptual metaphors were coded, e.g., SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT IS FOOD, which is based on the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD (Lakoff *et al.* 1991: 84).

### 3.2.3 Identifying evaluative metaphorical expressions.

Evaluative metaphoric expressions were identified using criteria applied in the annotation procedure for evaluative stance and metaphor developed by Hidalgo-Downing and Pérez-Sobrino (2024) and Hidalgo-Downing *et al.* (2024). In this study, evaluative metaphoric expressions were marked as ‘positive’, ‘negative’, or ‘both’ depending on the connotations in the context of use. For a metaphoric expression to be coded as evaluative, the specific target domain had to be clearly identifiable in the text.

As in Martin and White (2005), evaluation in metaphoric expressions may be inscribed (explicit) or invoked (implicit). Inscribed evaluation occurs in (3), where the conventional metaphor SUFFERING FROM ILLNESS IS FIGHTING A WAR is used to conceptualise illness as an enemy in a battle, thus negatively evaluating this experience:

(3) It’s a battle that I let few help me with.

In some cases, the inscribed polarity of evaluative metaphoric expressions was reversed when the context in which they were used elicited the opposite value. For example, in (4), the inscribed negative evaluation of *fight* is negated by surrounding context, which indicates the author’s determination to overcome difficulties and maintain a positive attitude.

(4) I choose to be that person. To fight, to reflect and grow.

The conventional metaphor ILLNESS IS AN OPPONENT is often employed by people who suffer from illnesses such as depression, and the difficulty of living with illness is conveyed by referring to their *fight* or *battle* with the disease. However, in this case, the author casts themselves as an agent in their *fight* against depression, similar to cancer patients’ use of this metaphor in Semino *et al.* (2018: 106–107), in order “to express a desire and effort to get better, and present patients themselves as active and determined.”

Invoked evaluation occurs when, rather than condemning or praising the target, metaphor is used to imply a judgement. For example, in (5), there is an implied negative evaluation of spending too much time using social media to see what other people are doing, as this is conceptualised as watching people through the windows of their home.

- (5) Social media is like a window into other people's lives. How you gonna live your life when you're out here peeping in windows?

The evaluation of target domains typically occurs when source domain connotations are mapped onto the target domain, such as the use of the DRUGS source domain in this sample. In (6), the metaphoric expression *fixes* evaluates the specific target domain SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT negatively, as the most basic dictionary entry (in *Collins*) for the noun *fix* that contrasts with the contextual example is “an injection of an addictive drug such as heroin.”<sup>7</sup>

- (6) ... maintain a balance of getting your social media fixes without the damaging effects.

However, when the DRUGS source domain is employed to conceptualise the target domain SOCIAL MEDIA USE, this does not always result in a negative evaluation. For example, the practice of stopping using social media for a period of time is conceptualised as *detoxing* in (7):

- (7) I took one week away from social media to detox and clear my mind.

The most basic dictionary entry for detox in the *Collins* dictionary is:

If someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol detoxes, or if another person detoxes them, they undergo treatment which stops them from being addicted.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in this case, the metaphoric expression *detox* was coded as positive, given that stopping being addicted to a substance carries a positive connotation.

Finally, there were instances where the evaluative connotation was ambivalent, and marked as ‘both’ positive and negative given the context of use. For example, metaphorically conceptualising social media as a sedative is positively evaluated in (8):

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fix>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fix>

- (8) ... everyone is equally tired and frustrated yet sedated by the cool blue light of their phones.

Typically, sedatives are prescribed to treat anxiety, not tiredness or frustration, and the author later regrets the effects of ... *the aimless scroll, the blank looks, the lack of human connect* caused by social media in the same text.

## 4. RESULTS

The results are organised so that each subsection (4.1–4.4) deals with one of the four research questions the study aims to address. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 provide a descriptive analysis of social media source domains and evaluative metaphors (respectively), Section 4.3 offers a descriptive analysis of source domains used to conceptualise mental health, and Section 4.4. presents an analysis of how people use metaphors to discuss the benefits and challenges of social media use, as outlined by Naslund *et al.* (2020: 247).

### 4.1. Social media source domains

In this corpus, 209 metaphoric expressions are identified to conceptualise the target domains of social media content, social media platforms, and social media use. The results were quantified and presented below to discuss the percentage of metaphoric expressions that employ specific source domains within each target domain.

RQ1: How is social media conceptualised in terms of the target domains listed below?

- a) Social media content.
- b) Social media platforms.
- c) Social media use.

#### 4.1.1. Social media content

33 expressions (16%) are used to identify social media content. The most frequent source domains are DRUGS and SUBSTANCE, as shown in Figure 1. The ‘other’ category in this figure and in subsequent figures comprises instances of the same source domain appearing twice or less in the corpus.

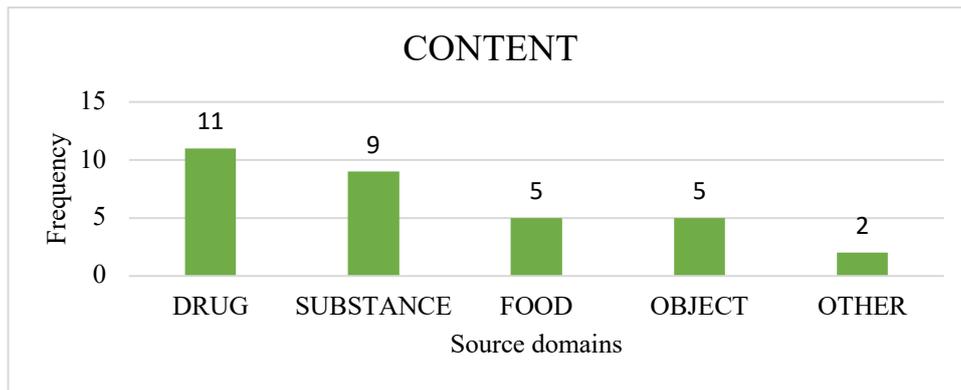


Figure 1: Social media content source domains

The DRUGS source domain is often used when people discuss their dependency on social media, either by using words that refer to *addiction*, as in (9), or by using words that are specific to drug use, as in (10):

(9) I had become addicted and consumed by Twitter.

(10) I'm a self-proclaimed social media junkie.

The SUBSTANCE source domain is used to conceptualise content that can *douse* (11) or *flood* (12) newsfeeds:

(11) No, I do not douse my social media in depressing posts.

(12) I've found when you are not surrounded by the constant flood of disheartening news stories ...

The metaphor SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT IS FOOD is employed to discuss social media content that people are *fed* (13), and to discuss content that negatively affects users (14):

(13) When our brains are fed news stories, social media feeds and email inboxes first thing in the morning ...

(14) Think about what triggers you, what leads you to compare, whatever it is that leaves a bad taste in your mouth.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Social media platforms

79 expressions (38%) are used to identify social media platforms. The most frequent source domains are PLACE, PERSON and OBJECT (see Figure 2).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholls, Kat. 2018. [How to Take Care of Yourself Online \(happiful.com\)](http://happiful.com)

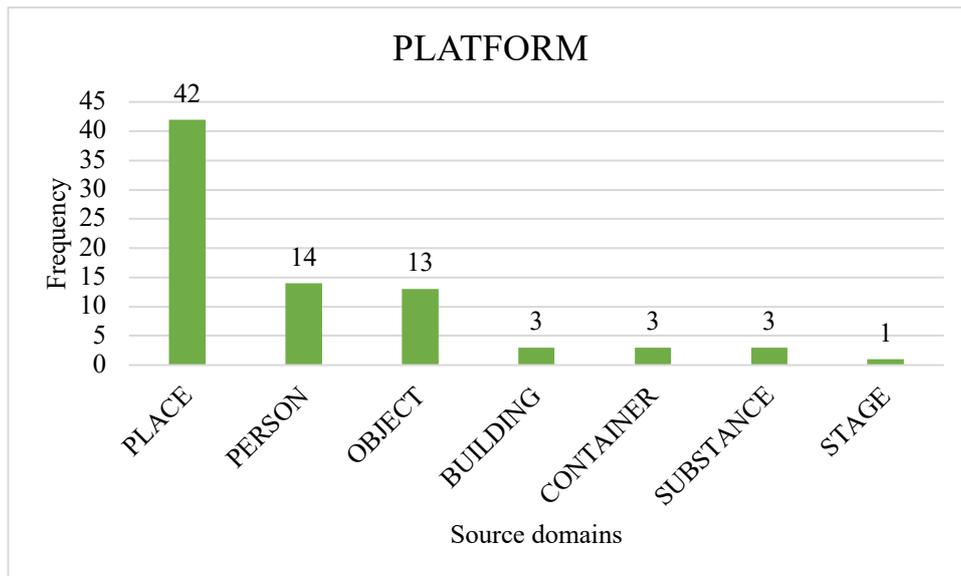


Figure 2: Social media platform source domains

The PLACE source domain is primarily activated by nouns that conceptualise social media as a physical place, such as *terrain* and *landscape* (15), or a *world* (16):

(15) ... this technology is the new terrain on the landscape of communications

(16) It's easy to get lost in the beautiful place that is Instagram world.

Goatly (1997: 58) provides an in-depth list of how language constructs activities as places from which people can leave, enter, and move around in. In this sample, the PLACE source domain is also activated by verbs that foreground social media as a site for carrying out particular activities, such as *stalking*, as illustrated in (17):

(17) Before you know it, you have just spent 20 minutes stalking a total stranger.

The metaphor SOCIAL MEDIA IS A PERSON is employed when users conceptualise social media platforms as a person that can carry out certain actions, such as *taunting* people, as shown in (18):

(18) Social media can also taunt us by bombarding us with the adventures of people better left in our past.

Similarly, algorithms and platforms are also conceptualised as people that can be *trained* or *taught* to do something by changing settings to block certain content, as in (19):

(19) This trains the algorithm and teaches Instagram to show you more of the content you want to see.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the OBJECT source domain is used when comparing accounts to *CVs* (20), or a *magazine* (21):

(20) Instagram is like your cool CV.

(21) ... running a successful Instagram and blog is like running your own magazine.

#### 4.1.3. Social media use

Finally, 96 (46%) metaphoric expressions are used to conceptualise social media use. The most frequent source domains are PATH, DRUG and FOOD (see Figure 3).

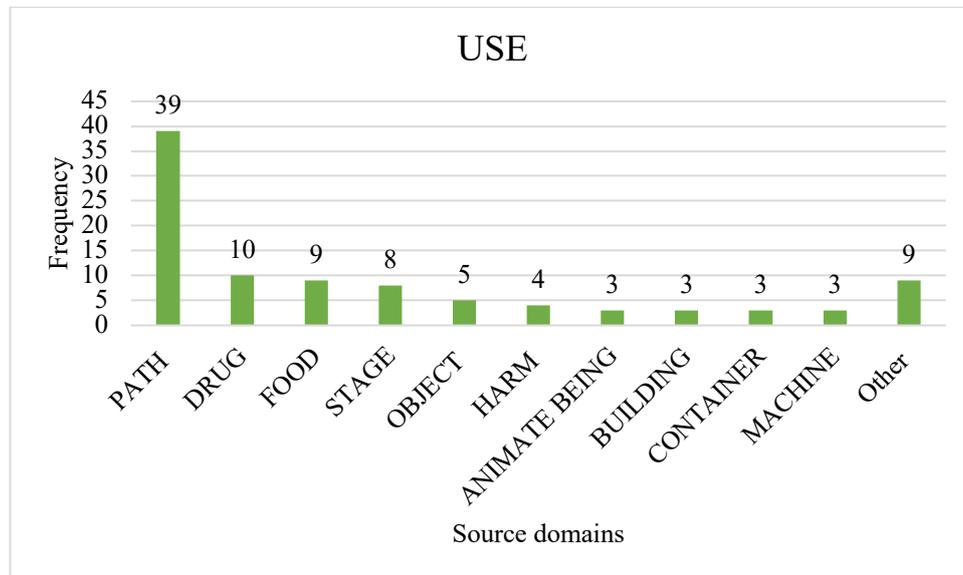


Figure 3: Social media use source domains

The PATH source domain is typically activated by verbs of motion, such as *hopping* (22) or *navigate* (23) between pages and websites:

(22) ... hopping from one newsfeed to the next can be a good stress reliever.

(23) ... it [social media] can be a fantastic and fun tool if I navigate and utilise it responsibly.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholls, Kat. 2018. [How to Take Care of Yourself Online \(happiful.com\)](http://happiful.com)

The PATH source domain is primarily used to discuss reducing or stopping the use of social media for certain periods of time. In these cases, although social media is conceptualised as a ‘place’, it is the movement to and from this place, i.e., connecting and disconnecting from apps, that is foregrounded. This is exemplified in (24) *vacation* and (25) *venturing back* below:

(24) I would also take vacations from social media by deleting social media apps off of my phone on the weekend.

(25) If your mood improves, then you can venture back in.

The DRUGS source domain is used when individuals conceptualise not using social media for a specific period as *detoxing* (26) or doing a *cleanse* (27):

(26) If not, it might be time to detox.

(27) ... if that sounds like you, it’s time for a social media cleanse.

Although a *cleanse* can refer to a variety of substances, such as unhealthy or harmful foods, it is interpreted as belonging to the DRUGS or FOOD source domain when other words that belong to that domain are previously activated within the text. For example, in the same article, the author discusses the addictive nature of social media and states that trying not to use social media is *like not being able to put down a cigarette or other addictive substance*.

Finally, the FOOD source domain is also used to discuss restricting social media use as going on a *diet* (28), and unrestricting this use for a certain period of time is conceptualised as a *cheat day* (29):

(28) I decided to go on a social media diet.

(29) A cheat day one Sunday afternoon (two hours of pure wasted social media time) left me feeling completely anxious.

The results in this section indicate that the target domain of social media use is the most productive site for metaphoric expressions, especially the PATH source domain. The prevalence of PATH metaphors is most likely motivated by the conceptualisation of social media as a place, which provides users with a means to discuss the action of connecting to or disconnecting from platforms, and the action of accessing different pages or accounts. It is interesting to note the trend in the evolution of metaphors regarding internet

use in the context of social media; while once people just ‘surfed’ the internet and exchanged information in the form of files using the ‘information superhighway’, the extensive amount of source domains employed to discuss the various aspects of social media and its use indicate that, nowadays, people rely on social media for much more than simply sharing information.

#### 4.2. Evaluative social media metaphors

RQ2: Are metaphors used to conceptualise social media target domains evaluative? If so, what is the predominant value?

As can be seen in Figure 4, of the 209 metaphoric expressions identified, 135 (65%) are evaluative; 24 (18%) expressions are used to evaluate social media content, 39 (30%) to evaluate social media platforms, and 72 (53%) to evaluate ways of using social media.

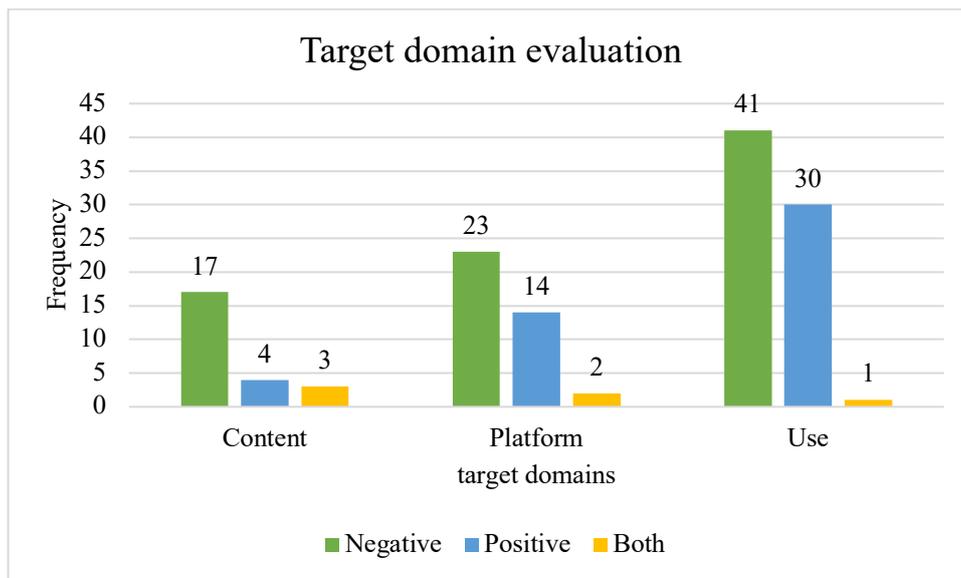


Figure 4: Evaluative metaphors for social media target domains

##### 4.2.1. Social media content

Of the 24 metaphoric expressions that evaluate social media content, 17 (71%) are negative, 4 (17%) are positive, and 3 (12%) are coded as both positive and negative.

The DRUGS source domain primarily provides a negative evaluation of social media content when users discuss its addictive nature (30):

(30) Make no mistake about it, social media is addictive.

The SUBSTANCE source domain is used to conceptualise excessive negative content, such as *flood* (4; see section 3.2.3) or when content that stigmatizes mental health is seen as so abundant that it becomes difficult to ‘wade through’ (31):

(31) ... we’re left with a host of triggering and upsetting social media bumf to wade through.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding positive evaluation, the SUBSTANCE source domain is also used to refer to content that can be *sprinkled* over one’s newsfeed, as shown in (32):

(32) Gone are the unnecessary reminders of particularly difficult moments, and at the top of my feed are sprinkles of humor and strength.

The instances where metaphoric expressions are marked as ‘both’ occur when the DRUGS source domain is used to discuss what is a potentially positive aspect of drug use, such as the ‘sedative’ example discussed in Section 3.2.3 (see example 8). Another example of this ambivalent evaluation in the sample occurred when one author described waking up to notifications in the morning as a *rush* (33) and something they looked forward to. However, the surrounding co-text also highlights how *addictive* this *rush* can be:

(33) It’s like a little rush. Make no mistake about it, social media is addictive.

#### 4.2.2. Social media platforms

Of the 39 evaluative metaphoric expressions that conceptualise social media platforms, 23 (59%) are negative, 14 (36%) are positive, and 2 (5%) are coded as both positive and negative.

The PERSON source domain negatively evaluates the way that algorithms decide what content appears on newsfeeds (34), and to conceptualise social media as a person with an *insatiable appetite* that *eats* your time, as illustrated in (35):

(34) Don’t let the Facebook Wizard of Oz behind the curtain control how much support you get from people.

(35) If you’re not careful, Facebook will eat your time. Its appetite is insatiable.

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholls, Kat. 2018. [How to Take Care of Yourself Online \(happiful.com\)](http://happiful.com)

The OBJECT source domain is used to criticise the ways in which social media platforms negatively impact self-esteem, particularly when users compare themselves with others (36), or when people who suffer from illness negatively evaluate the way they *hide behind* social media accounts, because they worry that their symptoms will *embarrass* them when socialising, as illustrated in (37):

(36) It's a wacky funhouse mirror that distorts the image we see when we look into it.

(37) I hide behind my devices to avoid potential embarrassment, strengthening my anxiety in the process.

Regarding positive evaluation, the OBJECT source domain conceptualises social media as a *lifeline* that provides a way for people who suffer from illness to connect with others, as in (38):

(38) Do I leave the lifeline of social media instead?

Finally, the PLACE source domain is used when people discuss social media as an *amazing place* (39) that provides a way to connect with others, and to provide both a positive and negative evaluation of social media when one author highlights that there are positive aspects of social media, despite the fact that it can be overwhelming at times (40):

(39) Social media is an amazing place to connect with the world around us.

(40) Not all is bad in the world of social media, not when you can access support groups ...

#### 4.2.3. Social media use

Of the 97 metaphoric expressions used to evaluate social media use, 42 (57%) are negative, 29 (42%) are positive, and 1 (1%) is coded as both positive and negative.

The practice of passively using social media, i.e., viewing content and posts as opposed to engaging with others and uploading content, is negatively evaluated when people who do this are conceptualised as *ghosts*, as illustrated in (41):

(41) ... become one of those Facebook ghosts that sees everything but is never evidenced to have been there.

The FOOD source domain negatively evaluates social media use when one author who, having been following a social media *diet*, had a *relapse* (42) after unrestricting social media use for a day:

(42) A relapse on social media left me feeling bad.

When discussing how comparing on social media can make people feel socially isolated, one author used the PATH source domain to discuss how people *fall into* (43) this habit, while another author used it to highlight how difficult it is to moderate the time they spend on social media (44):

(43) ... we fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to others as we scroll through our feeds.

(44) Soon, you are sucked in, creepily scanning through pictures...it's a slippery slope.

Regarding positive evaluations of social media use, the DRUGS and FOOD source domains are employed when people share methods of reducing social media use, such as *detoxing* (26; see section 4.1.3) and *diets* (45):

(45) I stopped comparing myself to others. This happened by day two of the diet!

The PATH source domain is used when people conceptualise *leaving* social media for a period of time when they feel that the way they use it has become problematic, as in (24) and (25; see section 4.1.3)

Finally, controlling the types of content that you see on your newsfeed is positively evaluated by conceptualising social media accounts as homes. The TV presenter Marie Kondo, who is famous for teaching people how to organise and declutter their homes, is referenced in (46). The author uses the OBJECT source domain to conceptualise social media accounts and content that don't *bring joy* as clutter, and she encourages people to go *full Marie Kondo* and declutter their newsfeeds:

(46) ... look at who you're following on social media and decide if they bring you joy...go full Marie Kondo on your social media accounts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholls, Kat. 2018. [How to Take Care of Yourself Online \(happiful.com\)](http://happiful.com)

In summary, metaphors that evaluate social media in this corpus are more often used to provide a negative evaluation, particularly in the case of social media content. This appears to be not only due to the addictive nature of social media content, but also due to the abundance of negative content that both stigmatises mental illness and triggers its symptoms.

#### 4.3. Mental health and well-being metaphors

RQ3: How are mental health and well-being conceptualised?

Regarding mental health and well-being, the analysis identified 168 metaphors that conceptualise mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, the symptoms of illness and whether they are improving or worsening, and the emotional state of authors and their general well-being. The most frequently used source domains are UP/DOWN or DARK/LIGHT SCHEMA, WAR, JOURNEY, CONTAINER, MACHINE, ANIMATE BEING, OBJECT, SPLIT-SELF, and PLACE (see Figure 5).

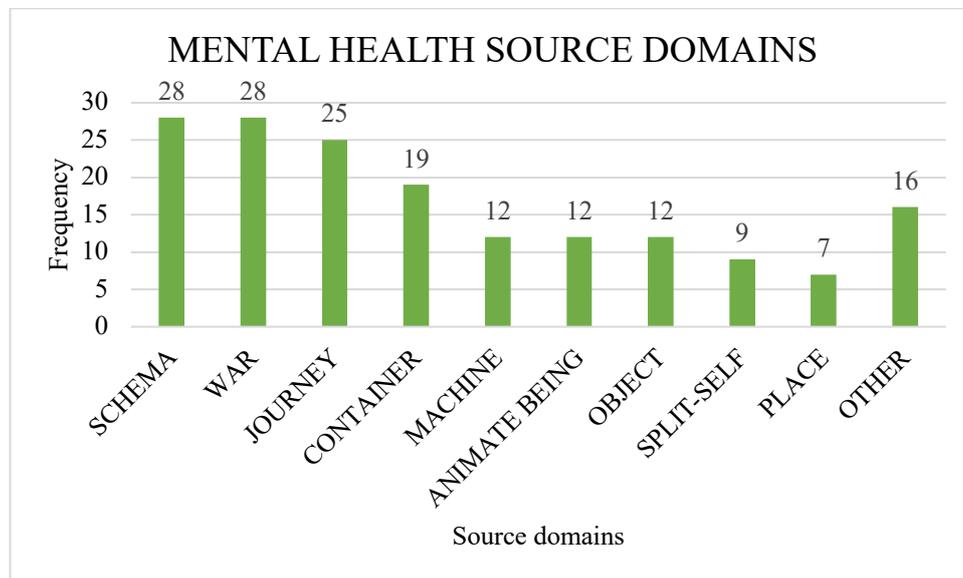


Figure 5: Mental health and well-being source domains

People often rely on image schema, such as GOOD IS UP to describe emotional states and well-being when they feel well or happy (47), or BAD IS DOWN when they are feeling unwell or sad, as shown in (48):

(47) When it's good, it's good—your self-esteem is high.

(48) But everyone has their low days.

The WAR source domain is highly conventional in illness discourse, particularly among people who suffer from depression. When people use this source domain, illness is conceptualised as an enemy that they must fight (49), and living with symptoms or going through treatment is conceptualised as an ongoing battle (50):

(49) When I realised this was affecting me, I choose[sic] to try to combat it.

(50) It's my struggle. It's a battle that I let few help me with.

As regards journey, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is another highly conventional metaphor that people use to discuss living with illness, particularly when they conceptualise healing or getting better as forward motion along a path (51), or when they conceptualise symptoms that get worse as backwards motion along a path (52). While PATH metaphors conceptualise social media use as moving in and out of a place, JOURNEY metaphors highlight movement towards or away from a destination (goal).

(51) I look at what I can do to move towards the place I want to be.

(52) I feel like I'll be slipping back into nothingness and isolation.

The CONTAINER source domain is used to conceptualise a variety of experiences, such as the body as a container for emotions or energy that can be drained when using social media, as can be seen in (53). Furthermore, the CONTAINER source domain is also often used to discuss emotions or negative experiences as containers or bounded spaces that are difficult to *get out of* (54):

(53) Part of managing my health (as much as that's possible) is managing energy drains.

(54) I was in a funk, and it was hard to get out of it.

Regarding the MACHINE source domain, the PEOPLE ARE MACHINES metaphor is used to highlight how *unplugging* from social media can help people relax (55), or to discuss how people experience things differently because our minds are *wired differently* (56):

(55) Going unplugged for a few days can do wonders for your mental health.

(56) We are all wired differently; for some ... social media ... is soothing and provides solace.

As for the ANIMATE BEING source domain, people often conceptualise illnesses as animate beings in mental health and illness discourse, something which occurs in this sample when it is conceptualised as a *beast* that is difficult to escape from, as shown in (57):

(57) After wrestling with this relentless beast for more than 30 years, I have come to know its grasp ...

Finally, as well as the conventional conceptualisation of illness as a burden or weight, the OBJECT source domain is also used to discuss people's reactions to, and engagement with, users' social media posts:

(58) It's also a tangled web of emotions.

In summary, the data discussed in this section provide further evidence that highly conventional metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY and the CONTAINER and WAR source domains appear frequently in discourse on mental health and well-being, thus contributing to the extensive existing research on the metaphorical conceptualisation of emotions, illnesses, and disorders.

#### 4.4. Metaphors for the benefits and challenges of social media use

RQ4: How are metaphors used to discuss the benefits and challenges of social media use for individuals who suffer from illness?

In what follows, I provide a qualitative discussion on how people use metaphor to conceptualise the benefits and challenges of social media use. To present these results, I will rely on Naslund *et al.* (2020), who provide an in-depth discussion of the benefits and challenges of social media use for individuals with serious mental illness (see Section 2.3.).

##### 4.4.1. Benefits

One of the benefits that social media use can provide for people who suffer from illness is its capacity to facilitate social interaction. This is significant, as individuals who suffer from illness are at risk of social isolation when symptoms prevent them from interacting with others. This benefit is demonstrated when people employ the PLACE source domain to conceptualise social media as a site they can *visit*, positively evaluating it as *the place*

where I can get out even when I am trapped inside. The social connection that platforms provide is crucial and is highlighted by one author who states that it *makes me feel like I exist when I feel myself fading away*.

Another author uses the SPLIT-SELF metaphor to highlight that social media interaction is a critical part of what made me feel whole, which is based on the PROPERTIES ARE POSSESSIONS conceptual metaphor. The author realised she had *lost* this part of herself when she stopped using social media for a period of time, and afterwards found that when it is used responsibly, social media *can become a place where mental health support and connection flourishes*. However, it appears that users should take care not to become dependent on social media for interaction, as this became a problem for one author when it resulted in her surrender to one of the most harmful symptoms of social anxiety, as relying on social media led to her avoiding face to face interaction.

Social media also provides access to peer support networks, which people often utilise to share tips and receive strategies for coping with illness. In this sample, the sharing of tips and strategies was identified when people employed the DRUGS and FOOD source domains to discuss the positive experiences of going on social media *diets* and *detoxes*. The practice of taking a break from social media use was also discussed using the PEOPLE ARE MACHINES metaphor, with disconnecting from social media conceptualised as *going unplugged for a few days in order to reset your mind*.

Another benefit of social media use is highlighted when people discuss receiving or providing support online; for example, the UP/DOWN schema is used by an author who states that talking about the ups and downs of sobriety online helped both themselves and others, while another mentioned that while feeling low, she supported others and *tried to lift people up*.

Finally, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is used to discuss improvements in symptoms and how these were achieved, such as when one author stated that unfollowing people that negatively influence well-being was as a *great step* in her life.

#### 4.4.2. Challenges

One of the challenges posed by social media use is that it can increase symptoms of mental illness, particularly when people engage in negative comparisons that fuel

*insecurities*. The SUBSTANCE source domain is used to conceptualise content when one blogger found that exposure to the achievements of others online was *drowning me instead of inspiring me*. Another author employed the SPLIT-SELF metaphor to discuss how comparing themselves to others online *began to tear me and my self-esteem apart*.

Naslund *et al.* (2020: 249) found that negative comparison contributes to the “risk of rumination and subsequent increases in depression.” Rumination, which involves repeatedly thinking about or fixating on negative feelings and events, was specifically singled out as a consequence of comparing with others online, as shown in (59).

(59) My brain held a continuous whispering soundtrack called, “I’m not good enough.”

Fortunately, some individuals are aware that comparing themselves to others online can negatively influence their well-being and they take steps to manage this. For example, one author pointed that *you have ultimate control over who you follow* and used the OBJECT source domain to conceptualise accounts that you can *get rid of*. Similarly, a blogger invited influencers to share their experiences of how comparing themselves online negatively affected them, in order to *pull back the curtain and let you know what’s really up*. In this instance, the metaphor SOCIAL MEDIA IS A STAGE was employed to conceptualise followers as audience members, social media accounts or profiles as the stage, and the work that goes into creating posts and content as activity that occurs backstage.

Naslund *et al.* (2020) also state that prolonged use of social media can cause symptoms of mental health to increase and can negatively affect well-being. One individual stated that they stopped using social media because they felt like they were *being swallowed alive by the symptoms of mental illness*, while another author stated that they were *happy to be free from the burden* of social media but employed the FORCE schema to highlight how they felt themselves *being pulled to re-download the apps*.

While some did manage to reduce their social media use, other people commented that social media’s addictive nature made it difficult to do so, employing idiomatic expressions that activate the PATH source domain to conceptualise unintentionally using social media for too long (60), or to express how difficult social media use is to moderate by comparing it to the moderating addictive substances (61):

(60) ... between the allure of the endless scroll and the voyeuristic element, it's hard not to fall down a rabbit hole.

(61) Like trying to moderate alcohol, it's too much of a slippery slope.

The DRUGS source domain is used to discuss being unable to restrict *technology binges* that left one author with a *nagging sense of emptiness*, while another used the CONTAINER source domain to describe finding themselves in a *self-imposed prison of mindlessness*.

Another challenge of social media use is exposure to hostile interactions or triggers via comments and posts. For example, the WAR source domain is used to conceptualise social media *bombarding us with people better left in our past*. Similar harm can be caused by seeing content that triggers negative emotions and feels like a *bullet in the back*, leading to rumination when the post *left the confines of the screen and filled my room and my mind*.

For those who suffer from illness and had managed to become aware of situations that can trigger symptoms in their daily lives, the PEOPLE ARE MACHINES metaphor was used to highlight how social media posed a new challenge because they had to identify a *fresh set of switches* that could *cause my sleeping ogre to awaken*. While some people take steps to manage these triggers, acknowledging that they have to *tread carefully*, others decide to *leave* social media because of its potential to increase symptoms.

Finally, I will address a potential benefit/challenge of social media use that was not identified by Naslund *et al.* (2020,) but has been highlighted in the sample, namely escapism as a coping mechanism. When conceptualising social media as a place, one author praised being able to *visit worlds ways away from my own* when life became overwhelming. However, this was only a temporary solution to symptoms of illness, as the author stated eventually the *depressive thoughts return*. For some, symptoms became worse when social media was used as a coping mechanism, with one author stating that this means of escape can *quickly lead me down a rabbit hole of anxiety*. Finally, some individuals seem to be aware of the risk of using social media as a coping mechanism when experiencing symptoms of illness, stating that during these periods *a trip on social media is the worst thing*. In drawing attention to the potential negative aspects of using social media as coping mechanism, one author used the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor to

highlight that spending too much time on social media will prevent one from moving towards their destination (goal), as the vast amount of content that is available online is easy to get *lost* in, as shown in (62):

(62) Are you spending precious life moments lost in a sea of highlight reels?

To conclude this section, it is important to highlight the potential advantages of applying corpus linguistics and CMT alongside studies in fields that investigate people's behaviour, thought processes, and emotions. Using Naslund *et al.*'s (2020) analysis as a guide, this study has identified metaphors to support claims that social media provides opportunities for interaction and peer support, and that social media poses a challenge for people when it triggers symptoms of mental illness and exposes them to hostile behaviour and content online. Furthermore, the analysis has also identified that some people use social media as a coping mechanism to 'escape' when feeling overwhelmed. While at times this can provide a form of instant relief, symptoms often return when people stop using social media, and more research is needed to understand how this form of 'escapism' can affect symptoms and patients over a prolonged period of time.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This research has contributed to the study of evaluative metaphors in health discourse on social media and its relationship with mental health and well-being, and it has also contributed to research on the figurative understanding of social media and mental health.

Regarding RQ1, the most frequent source domains for social media content are DRUGS, SUBSTANCE and FOOD; the most frequent source domains for social media platforms are PLACE, PERSON and OBJECT; and the most frequent source domains for social media use are PATH, DRUGS and FOOD.

Regarding RQ2, 65 per cent of metaphoric expressions that conceptualise social media are evaluative, and evaluative metaphors are primarily used to negatively evaluate the addictive nature of social media content, the way that algorithms decide what content users see, and the passive or excessive social media use.

As for RQ3, the most frequent source domains to conceptualise mental health and well-being are UP/DOWN schema, WAR, JOURNEY and CONTAINER. Finally, the answer to RQ4 is that the benefits of social media use for people who suffer from illness are

primarily highlighted by conceptualising social media as a place that provides an opportunity for social interaction when symptoms prevent face to face communication. In contrast, the challenges of social media use are highlighted when users discuss the tendency to compare their lives to others, and to discuss how excessive use of social media platforms can increase symptoms.

Finally, a limitation of this study that may be addressed in future research is that it does not employ inferential statistics. The aim of this pilot study was to identify frequently used source domains for social media and to discover if individuals use metaphor to discuss social media's effect on mental health and well-being. Future studies may carry out inferential statistics on a larger corpus to discover whether the higher percentage of negative evaluative expressions is statistically significant, and to compare it with other corpora (as in Fuoli *et al.* 2022).

Another limitation is that, while manual annotation can provide valuable insights into the evaluative function of metaphor, visualisation software can identify features of corpora such as collocations, clusters, keyword analysis and KWIC concordances, which would enrich this research and shed more light on social media's effect on mental health and well-being.

Should both of these limitations be addressed in future studies, the overall results could be compiled to produce a 'metaphor menu', similar to that produced from the results of Semino *et al.*'s (2018) research on metaphor and cancer. This menu could be used for personal or professional purposes, where patients are presented with a collection of metaphors that provide different perspectives on social media's impact on mental health and well-being, so that they can choose metaphors that resonate with them. For example, when discussing how interacting with a certain type of content can trigger symptoms, people could be encouraged to think of social media as food. In the same way that eating too much junk food in one sitting or too frequently can make us feel ill, frequently viewing or interacting with negative content can also cause us to feel ill.

In conclusion, this study has contributed to the under-researched area of the conceptualisation of social media by identifying which source domains people rely on to communicate their experience of social media use. In addition, the analysis has demonstrated that metaphor is a valuable tool for investigating the benefits and risks of social media use for mental health and well-being, as it provides a way of analysing this topic using real-world data (blogs and articles) instead of self-report questionnaires,

which can affect results due to bias. Finally, by approaching this topic from CMT, the highly complex relationship between social media use and mental health and well-being can be studied from a range of perspectives. Some of the perspectives are how people are influenced by specific content, how people evaluate the way that social media algorithms prioritise which content they see on their newsfeeds, and why people decide to leave social media platforms or return to them.

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