

# The role of depression in posting about suicide on social media: A case control study



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## Introduction

- Suicide is a leading cause of death for young adults
- Depression is a known risk factor for suicide
- It remains unknown how depression is related to posting about **suicide or suicidal ideation (S/SI)** on social media

**The purpose of this case control study was to test the association between depression symptoms ranging from moderate to severe and posting about S/SI on social media.**

## Methods

This study was approved by the UW-Madison IRB.

### Participants

Young adults aged 18–25 years who had consumed alcohol in the past 30 days and had at least one account they used monthly on Instagram, Facebook, and/or Twitter were recruited via Qualtrics panels.

### Measures

- Depression was assessed in an online survey using the Patient Health Questionnaire-8 (PHQ-8)

PHQ Score Range	Depression Classification
0–4	None to minimal
5–9	Mild
10–14	Moderate
15–19	Moderately severe
20–24	Severe

- S/SI references were identified during content analysis of participants' Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts over six months

### Case control design

Cases were defined as young adults who posted at least one S/SI reference on social media. Each case was randomly matched to two controls based on age.

### Analysis

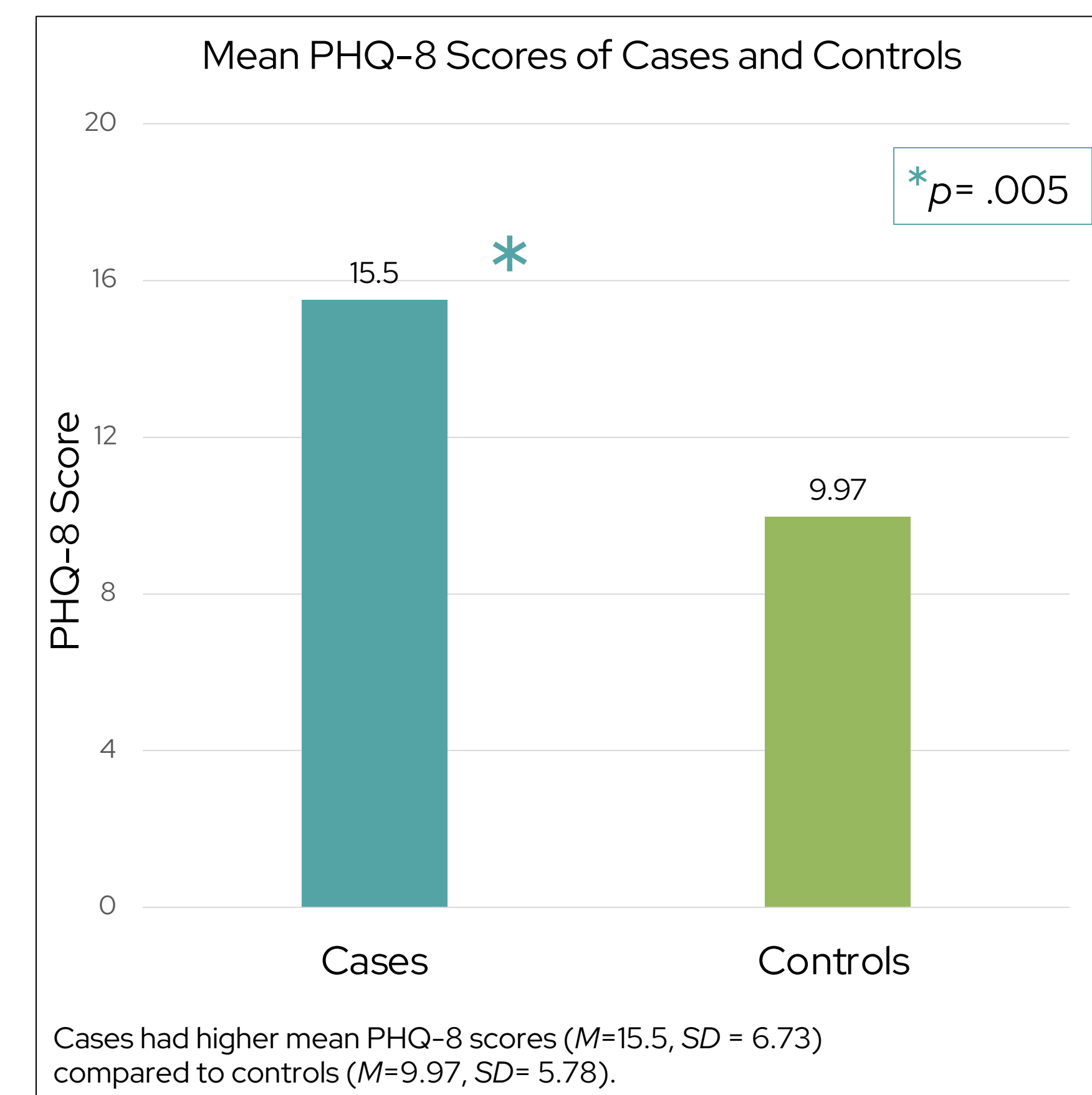
A t-test compared mean PHQ-8 scores between cases and controls. A logistic regression in STATA tested the association between moderate to severe depression symptoms and posting about S/SI.

## Results

**16 cases** and **32 controls** were included in the study.

Cases had a mean age of 23.19 (*SD* = 2.14 years).

Cases were 68.75% white and 68.75% female.



**The odds of posting about S/SI were more than 5 times higher for participants who had moderate to severe depression symptoms compared to participants who had no to mild symptoms.**  
(OR=5.57; 95% CI [1.32,23.44]; *p* = .019)



## Conclusions

- Findings suggest that S/SI references in young adults' social media posts are strongly tied to their offline experiences with depression
- Given that access to therapeutic psychological services varies among young adults, recognizing S/SI posts on social media may be useful for identifying individuals who might benefit from mental health outreach and intervention
- Future research should examine whether different types of S/SI references on social media, such as user-written text or shared memes, vary in their associations with depression to determine which post types should be cause for concern

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