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THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

AMONG LATE ADOLESCENTS

BY

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THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS AMONG LATE ADOLESCENTS

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Dedication

I wholeheartedly dedicate this work to Health Professionals, Educators, Adolescents, Policymakers, Scholars, and Parents.

Acknowledgement

My first thanks go to my parents, Abdul Rasool and Shahida Rasool Larik; with their ongoing guidance and help, I am as far ahead as I am in this lifetime.

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Abstract

Problematic internet use in adolescents is linked with a higher risk of experiencing mental and psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, sleep problems, chronic stress, and psychological distress. The research question guiding this research was: What are the connections between social media, particularly online video platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube, and psychological disorders among late adolescents? A homogenous sample of six participants, young adults aged 18-21, were recruited and individually interviewed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) guided this study, and six themes were identified: impacts of social media use on youths, social comparisons and self-esteem issues in female teenagers, addiction to social media and fear of missing out, influencers' impact on youths, social media use in pre-teenagers, and peer pressure. The study may help develop a guide for the mental health community to consider social media issues while helping teenagers with psychological distress.

Keywords: Social Media, Mental Health, Well-being, Adolescents, Depression, Anxiety, Social Comparisons, Stress, Psychological Distress

Preface

We must protect families, we must protect children, who have inalienable rights and should be loved, should be taken care of physically and mentally, and should not be brought into the world only to suffer.

—Indira Gandhi, *Interview with Oriana Fallaci*

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The digital world is evolving with new and diverse activities accessible on screen-based devices. With technological advancement, social networking sites are gaining popularity, particularly among the younger population. Teenagers are the most prominent social media consumers, as they are the first generation raised in a highly digital society. Social media is now integral to teenagers' daily lives, particularly their social lives (Khasawneh et al., 2020). Odgers and Jensen (2020) shared an estimate from their reports indicating adolescents spend more hours with screen media than their time in school, and half of these teenagers claim to be online constantly (Hynes et al., 2020). However, increasing engagement in heavy screen-based activities may come at a cost (Shannon et al., 2022).

Adolescence is a period when significant developmental brain changes are happening. Also, the pre-frontal cortex, involved in rational decision-making, has not fully formed. So, teenagers often rely on their amygdala, an emotional processing zone, when making choices (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Furthermore, there are significant peaks in dopamine expression, with dopamine levels peaking in the prefrontal cortex (Casey et al., 2008), making adolescents particularly vulnerable to impulsive decision-making, posing a risk on social media platforms where the data is shared and accessible with a single click. Additionally, during this period, neural connections are fine-tuned through synaptic pruning, enhancing the effect of social media content in reinforcing specific thought processes (Selemon, 2013) – which may lead to unhealthy thoughts. Heavy social media use may disrupt young adult's daily functioning, potentially impairing cognitive and emotional functioning (Walker, 2018). However, this is not connected with mental health; other factors should also be considered (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016).

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1950) suggests that adolescence involves the struggle between adjusting and standing out, causing identity experimentation (Knight, 2017); social media provides a platform for this struggle. Lewin's Field Theory (1951) describes adolescence as an essential shift where the dynamics between social environment and psychological change impact behaviour. Social media's virtual social circles act as digital social environments that can powerfully shape thoughts and behaviours.

Due to the immature stage of psychological development during childhood and adolescence, there remains concern over their identical digital rights to adults (Lister, 2007). The issue is that online activity requires a high level of responsibility, such as protecting the self and others online, which is a hefty request before adulthood (Third & Collin, 2016). Furthermore, digital suggestions of online acts expose adolescents to judgment, potentially interfering with self-expression vital to enhancing development (Bulger et al., 2017).

Children and young adolescents' rights may be the responsibility of their primary care provider. However, once admission to online platforms has been granted, protection should continue due to the range of harms that could be experienced online (Livingstone & Third, 2017). Social media's virtual circles increase issues surrounding digital rights, as examined extensively by Livingstone and Third (2017). Most importantly, safety in online spaces is a parental responsibility, and that a youth/teen needs to be well-adjusted to participate in digital platforms (Swist et al., 2015). In this way, children and adolescents should feel confident in obtaining the payback of the digital world while feeling adequately protected.

Research Question

Considering the above situation, this research study has the following research question: What are the connections between social media, particularly online video platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube, and psychological disorders among youth?

Statement of the Problem

My review of the literature indicates an interactive nature of social media associated with anxiety, depression, and lack of emotional regulation skills. Further, there is a growing body of evidence that confirms the adverse impact of social media on teenagers, leading to depressive symptoms and other associated psychological disorders. In the last few years, there have been growing apprehensions about the effect of social media on adolescents' psychological well-being, especially related to fear of missing out, anxiety, and depression. The two leading mental health concerns of anxiety and depression will be discussed in this paper, as well as other psychological conditions/effects relating to these two categories because of a noticeable overlap and comorbidity (Hoge et al., 2017). The key findings from this research study will be shared with health professionals, scholars, educators, young adults, and parents.

Key Arguments

Although social media is accessible to everyone, young adults are the most active users (Orben, 2020). Late adolescents and young adults spend an extended amount of time on social media, so understanding its impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of young adults is vital (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Mental health challenges are becoming increasingly prevalent among young adults. This is leading to an increase in research to explore social and emotional well-being, increased rates of depression (Lin et al., 2016), anxiety, and other challenges related to these two.

Several quantitative studies have found an association between social media use and psychological issues (Keles et al., 2018; Elkhazeen et al., 2023). However, only a few qualitative studies discussed social media's effects on young adults' psychological health (Memon et al., 2018; Gentina et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need for more qualitative research to find the adolescents' perspectives on the effect of social media on their mental health and psychological well-being. This study will provide insight into the ways through which social media can impact mental health and psychological well-being from adolescents' perspectives.

Significance of the Research

With the hope of promoting the mental and psychological well-being of young adults, the findings in the context of adolescent cognitive and social development will help provide insight into the ways that shape the impact of social media on mental health and well-being during the adolescent years. This will promote future research to consider adolescents', youth's, and children's views on improving social media and its implications for mental health.

Motivation for the Study

For the last five years, I have worked with children and young adults struggling with mental health challenges. I assist this population both in the home and school settings. Based on my observations while working with young adults, I observed them spending extended periods on social media, resulting in depression, self-harming, and low self-esteem. Simultaneously, through news, social media forums, and journal articles, I became aware of the positive and negative impacts of social media's impact on young adults' mental health. Therefore, I became interested in this topic. I explored it in depth in one of my previous qualitative research courses. Moreover, through thematic analysis, the following themes emerged:

Figure 1

A Thematic Map from GCAP 693
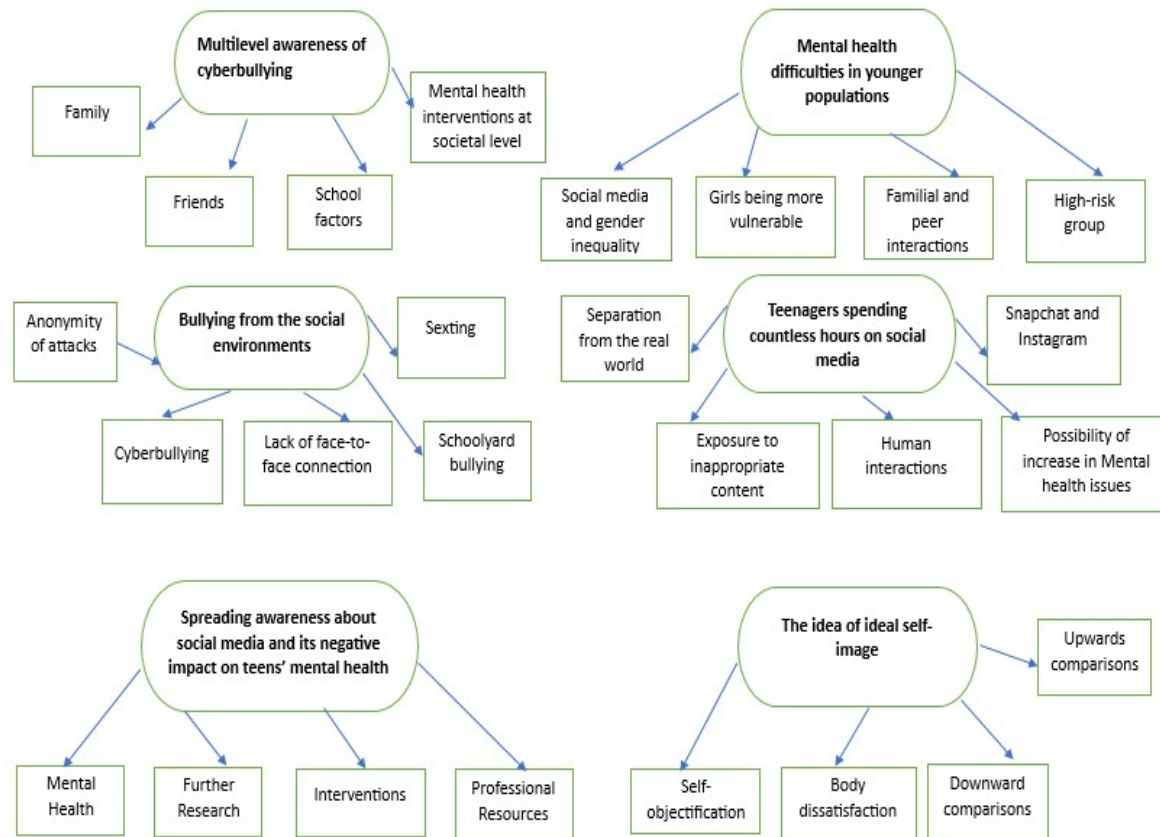
My experience working with young adults and the above themes were just some motivating factors for me. I became passionate about this topic and started digging deeper; I found several studies indicating a strong connection between social media use and teenagers' mental health (Abi-Jaoude, 2020; Adorjan and Ricciardelli, 2021; Flannery, 2023.; Magner, 2018). After gaining more knowledge about this topic, I realized how vital psychology's role is in dealing with the demands of the digital era. In other words, the main aim of psychology should be to spread awareness about the charms and harms of social media. Crucially, the research indicated more psychological disturbances among girls after unmonitored use of social media (Elmquis & McLaughlin, 2017; Saunders & Eaton, 2018; Twenge & Martin, 2020).

The challenges on TikTok, unsafe videos shared on Snapchat, and access to unwarned content on social media forums made me interested in exploring more about the social media world and its effects on the vulnerable population. Most recently, in September 2023, I learned about efforts in the United States and internationally to ban TikTok and legislation to ban children under 13 from joining social media. The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory demanding action to save children online (Abbasi, 2023). Similarly, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued its first-ever advisory, providing recommendations to save youths from the risks of social media (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023).

Researcher Positionality

As an immigrant, cisgender, heterosexual novice therapist and researcher, I became interested in exploring the impact of sociocultural factors and Social Determinants of Health (SDH) on individuals' challenges. For informed data analyses, I understand that my views and interpretation of my social world could impact my research interests. Developing a reflexive journal and mapping my social identity helped me locate personal connections to acknowledge the impacts of my social location on this research. I also reflected on my intersecting cultural identities, such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, social class, and personal beliefs. While engaging in the reflexive practice, I examined my worldviews and subjective assumptions about the research question. By understanding my role and position as a researcher, I ended the power dynamics between me and the participants. Participants in this research shared their stories while I remained unbiased. While placing myself in participants' shoes, I was able to understand their emotional, insightful, and challenging experiences. This was intrinsically fascinating for me because it was not like the same old same, but the findings were full of surprises.

Considering the above-mentioned life and work experiences, I also adopted a metatheory positioning and started reflecting on methodologies that describe psychological functioning at the biological/medical level, psychological, relational, systems, and socio-cultural levels (Mascolo, 2020). This positioning was the integration of counselling and epistemological pluralism models, the integration of psychological knowledge presented in various levels and systems of a specific theory grounded on qualitatively solid and epistemological foundations (Edward, 2010).

Simultaneously, through news, social media forums, and journal articles, I became aware of the impact of social media. There were only a few qualitative studies conducted to explore this topic. So, from a place of curiosity, I decided to explore the subjective experiences of youths with social media use. As a qualitative researcher, instead of quantity, I wanted to focus on the quality of phenomena and human behaviour, including participants' words, phrases, and texts. Unlike conventional research, the creative bit happened during the study, not before the study. Findings were synthesized according to my knowledge and experience. I went beneath the face meaning of data. I identified core assumptions and developed concepts to make sense of data.

Research Purpose and Implications

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the connection between social media and psychological disorders among teenagers. At the micro level, results from this research can provide guidelines to parents to monitor their teenagers' use of social media, given that it can become problematic. Further, medical professionals treating youth with mental challenges and those who are vulnerable to the known risks of social media can discuss with young adults and their families the known dangers of social media. At the meso level, systems, school, and community-based activities and programs can share literature to increase awareness about social

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media use. According to the Alberta Digital Citizenship Policy Developmental guide, digital

citizenship encourages students to respect and protect themselves and others (Alberta Education,

2012). Moreover, at the macro level, federal institutions can invest in stronger laws, policies, and

public awareness campaigns and educate the public about the impact of problematic use of

digital media.

Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

Terminology

According to the APA dictionary of psychology, mental health is described as "a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to form constructive relationships and cope with ordinary demands and stresses of life" (APA, n.d.). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual can handle everyday stressors of life and work in a way that can contribute to the good of their community (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.).

Social media is an online platform on which individuals build networks and enable interactions by sharing pictures, comments, and reactions to content (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Li et al., 2020). Since social media has become one of the most powerful digital tools for teenagers, they use it not only for sharing their self-expression but also for self-comparison and self-evaluation behaviours (Guo, 2022). Several studies indicate that excessive use of social media negatively impacts teenagers.

Most importantly, research findings indicate that the tactics used by different social media platforms, notably YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat, are causing mental health issues among teenagers (Elkhazeen et al., 2023; McCashin & Murphy, 2023). For example, social media platforms such as TikTok introduced activity challenges in the severity of potential hazards, with the Benadryl challenge being one of the high-risk challenges (Elkhazeen et al., 2023). Elkhazeen et al. (2023) reported a case of a 14-year-old female who presented with a seizure from Benadryl overdose following participation in the TikTok Benadryl challenge. McCashin and Murphy (2023) revealed that alcohol-related content on TikTok showed a propensity to promote rapid

consumption of alcoholic drinks with positive associations such as humour, which could lead to addictive behaviour among teenagers.

"The word adolescence/young adulthood derives from the Latin *adolescere*— to grow up. However, defining the phase of life that stretches between childhood and adulthood has long posed a conundrum" (Sawyer et al., 2018, p. 1). Adolescence is a time of hormonal and psychological changes. At this time, teenagers' neural, cognitive, and social connections are evolving, so the environments provided by surrounding factors and social media could significantly impact teenagers' mental health (Orben, 2023).

YouTube

YouTube started in 2005 and rapidly topped the 2022 teen online landscape among social media platforms, as indicated in a survey because it is used by 95% of teenagers (Vogels et al., 2022). According to Akram and Kumar (2017), YouTube is a well-known video-based online site. Three PayPal workers established this networking site on February 14, 2005. On October 9, 2006, it was announced that Google would purchase the company for US$1.65 billion in stock, completed on November 13. At that time, it was Google's second-largest acquisition (Akram & Kumar, 2017). At the end of 2023, YouTube was valued at US$29.71 billion and had over 2.7 billion accounts (Ch, 2024).

TikTok

In 2020, TikTok exceeded 2 billion downloads worldwide. TikTok is the second most used app by adolescents regularly, and one in three teenagers uses it several times daily in North America (Bergman,2023; Swanson, 2023). Despite being the most used platform for children and young people, there is a lack of high-quality mixed research on TikTok content for its users and their mental health (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). This platform holds entertaining and

creative space such as filters, effects, text overlays, and a vast library of licensed music that consumers can incorporate into their videos.

TikTok engages its users in different dangerous challenges; for example, "Benadryl" (already mentioned above) and "Skull Breaker" are a few of them (Elkhazeen et al., 2023). The skull breaker challenge was introduced on TikTok. A 12-year-old boy in Alabama, USA and a 13-year-old boy in New Jersey, USA, were hospitalized with a significant concussion after doing the Skull Breaker Challenge at school (Columbia Broadcasting System [CBS] New York, 2020). Further, participating in these challenges can cause risks to young adults' mental and physical health. Further, TikTok, the social media app, submitted a US$5 million fine to the Federal Trade Commission in the USA to eliminate accusations of accessing personal information from children under 13 without parental consent (Matsakis, 2019).

As a result, in March 2023, the company mandated users aged 13 to 17 years to log in after 60 min of use with their passwords. It restricts direct messaging for users under 16 and allows a function for family pairing. As a researcher, to have first-hand experience with this forum, when I downloaded the app, the company asked, "Allow TikTok to track your activity across other companies' apps and websites." This allows TikTok to provide me with a better ad experience. However, it also highlights these apps' pervasive intrusion into phone users' lives.

Snapchat

Snapchat is the third most popular social media platform for teenagers, with over 300 million users. This company lets its users share and access videos, snaps, and messages. Moreover, because of its entertaining content and popularity, teenagers spend excessive time on this company, which can negatively impact their relationships (Dunn & Langlais, 2020; Clayton et al., 2013; Emery et al., 2015). Dunn and Langlais (2020) suggested that based on the unique

short-lived nature of Snapchat, where the content vanishes after it is opened and seen by users, this social media platform appears to have an unusual/unknown impact on teenagers' mental health. So, for example, what if someone wants to retrieve the content to use for later purposes or as proof? Users do not know where this data gets transferred (Dunn & Langlais, 2020). Dunn and Langlais (2020) strongly proposed a deeper evaluation of the connection between Snapchat and mental health to promote teenagers' mental well-being.

Prevalence of Depression/Anxiety/Mental Health Problems in Youth in Canada

In Canada and the United States, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are the most popular social media platforms among individuals of all ages (Petrucci, 2021). However, social media sites such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are more frequently visited by young adults, who are also the most active social media users (Petrucci, 2021). In a recent Statistics Canada survey, nearly 100% of respondents aged 15-30 reported using social media sites regularly, with usage rates declining as age increases (Statistics Canada, 2019, as cited in Petrucci, 2021).

High school teachers in the Canadian public education system gradually strive to get the attention of teenagers about where the presence of digital technology and social media platforms in social, personal, and educational environments is ubiquitous. However, a fundamental criticism of online tools that are supposed to be distracting in systems may be ignoring educationalists' responsibility to lessen some of the potential adverse effects on mental health, safety, and critical thinking, especially for the more vulnerable populations (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Gardner & Davis, 2013). Anderson and Jiang (2018) indicate that addiction to internet-connected technologies continues to impact young people in Canada. Researchers have shared negative results that include decreased mental health, resulting from anxieties related to technology and fear of missing out on social connectivity (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Based on the results from their study, Maras et al. (2015) indicated how sedentary, screen-based activities may relate to symptoms of depression and anxiety in youth. Further, the data acquired from their study revealed that the duration of sedentary screen time was associated with severe symptoms of depression and anxiety in a large sample of Canadian young adults. The authors suggested this is an apparent risk factor or marker of developing psychological disorders among Canadian youth (Maras et al., 2015).

Is Social Media the Only Exposure Contributing to this Problem?

Safe and caring families, helpful and supportive schools, and solid and supportive peers are crucial to assisting youths to develop to their full potential and attain the best health in adulthood. Improving adolescent mental and physical health worldwide demands improving youth's daily lives with families, peers, and schools, addressing risk and protective factors in the social environment and personal levels (Viner et al., 2012). McIsaac et al. (2023) indicated other risk factors contributing to the problem. These include lower levels of family support, gender-based health inequalities emerging during early developing years, low affluence, high-risk subgroups, lack of peer support, lack of adult support, risky behaviours, incomes below the federal poverty threshold, race, and other exploratory elements are the essential factors to consider.

After gaining knowledge about the Social Determinants of Health (SDH), I became interested in the impact of social media on teenagers' mental health. The World Health Organization defines SDH as conditions in which people are born, live, work, and grow, circumstances determined by family or society, distribution of money and power, and global resources (WHO, 2010). I learned from Viner et al. (2010) analyses that the strongest determinants of adolescent health are structural factors such as national wealth, income

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inequality, and access to education. However, keeping the social determinants in mind, exposure to social media can be one of the factors contributing to the problem.

Adolescent Anxiety/Depression Costs the Healthcare System in Canada

According to a study conducted by Health Canada's Cancer Bureau of the former Laboratory Centre for Disease Control (LCDC), the economic burden of mental disorders in Canada was $7.8 billion in 1993. Later, mental disorders ranked seventh among the 20 disease categories for which cost estimates were highlighted. In 1998, treating medically diagnosed mental disorders costs $6.3 billion, including $3.9 billion for hospital care, $887 million for other institutional care, $854 million for physician care, and $642 million for prescription medication (Stephens & Joubert, 2001). Currently, the annual economic cost of mental health conditions in Canada is estimated at over $50 billion, including healthcare costs, production losses, and a decrease in quality of life (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health[CAMH], n.d.)

Children and adolescents' mental health services play a crucial role in the health system, including acute hospitalization and residential placements. Recently, mental health issues have spiked among children and teenagers. According to the WHO estimation, neuropsychological disorders among this population will increase by over 50% internationally. Moreover, the expense of caring for this population accounts for a disproportionate amount of health care costs, as they need episodic, chronic, and ongoing care for multiple services. However, there is a gap in Canadian evidence regarding the expenses related to several service options for children and youth mental health (Stewart et al., 2019).

Problematic Use of Social Media Leading to Anxiety in Teenagers

Recent research indicates that teenagers choose to use their smartphones to be in contact with their affiliation groups on social media. Also, they want to stay connected with their peers at school or other environments. While doing so, when they develop a strong desire to stay updated on every piece of communication shared on different forums, they may become vulnerable to anxiety. Fioravanti et al. (2021) and Franchina et al. (2018) suggested that individuals who experience anxiety strive to minimize it by accessing their smartphone social media accounts. It happens more to those who Fear of Missing out (FOMO).

Sometimes, teenagers use social media to reduce their anxiety, which may lead to overuse of social media, phubbing (i.e., ignoring individuals they are physically with to pay attention to their cell phones), and attending to their offline interaction partners (Franchina et al., 2018). Fioravanti et al. (2021) indicated that FOMO seems to be closely associated with anxiety and depression. Moreover, Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2021) and Magner (2018) showed that there had been an increase in concerns about teenagers' vulnerability to social media addiction. The authors suggested that Canadian teenagers widely use Snapchat, which has become an increasingly socially compelled addictive behaviour, including a fear of losing connections and missing out.

Gentina et al. (2021) and Magner (2018) indicated that overall, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook are the most used social media platforms by teenagers 11-18 in North America. On these platforms, exposure to inappropriate content and unethical advertising (e.g., luxurious clothes, illegal or unsafe graphics, and vaping companies targeting teenagers) has caused anxiety and dissatisfaction among teenagers. Not only this, but such forums also promote materialism (e.g., watching other teenagers consuming luxury items and overestimating the popularity of that

consumption) in teenagers and pressure them to keep up with their online reputation by being active in online forums. Further, problematic internet use is linked with a higher risk of experiencing mental and psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, sleep problems, chronic stress, and low self-esteem (Sserunkuuma et al., 2023).

Anxiety and lack of trust in social media safety have become concerns for teenagers. As a part of developing age, adolescents are at risk of poor self-control and impulsive decisions (De-Sola Gutiérrez et al., 2016; Mahapatra, 2019). Duschinsky (2012) maintains that teenagers lack the process and development to consume or reproduce highly sexualized content on social media. Further, the author suggested that sexualizing minors can be at risk of increased threats such as child abuse and sexual violence, and girls are most likely to become victims of this act. Duschinsky (2012) described that this is one of many forms of gender oppression; the sexualization of adolescents can lead to several consequences, including mental health disturbances, psychological distress, and increased risk of sexual abuse.

Increase in Inpatient Hospital Admissions

The research question (exploring a connection between social media and teenagers' mental health) was finalized after reviewing several case studies and journal articles, which indicated an increase in teenagers' admissions to psychological wards. Abi-Jaoude (2020) showed that inpatient hospital admissions of children and adolescents for mental health grounds had augmented substantially between 2007 and 2014. Nierengarten (2018) revealed that hospital admissions of youth with depression leading to suicidal ideation are rising. Micheal S.Jellinek, a professor emeritus of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, Boston, recommended that depression and suicide are pediatric issues. The prevalence is so high and the

consequences so great, so there is an acute need for mental health professionals to identify strong

indicators associated with risks to adolescents' mental health (Nierengarten, 2018).

Depression Leading to Risk-Taking Behaviours

As mentioned above, Keles et al. (2020) suggested that the social media used by

teenagers and minors is linked with depression. Memon et al. (2018) and Sedgwick et al. (2019)

further indicated that depression in this age group leads to risk-taking behaviours, including

suicidality. For teenagers already experiencing depression, online social networking on Snapchat,

TikTok, and Instagram leads to enhanced exposure to self-harm behaviour because they receive

messages promoting self-harm, self-injurious behaviours of others, and adopting self-harm

activities from shared content on social media forums. Abi-Joude (2020) shared the results of his

survey. The author found that the 12-month prevalence of suicidal ideation and attempts at non-

suicidal self-injury among teenagers aged 14 to 17 was higher and notably higher in teen girls.

According to Bergman (2023), the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory, cautioning

of a mental health crisis among teenagers caused by their overuse of social media. "The Centre

for Disease Control reported a 146% increase in rates of suicide in the 12 to 16 age group since

2008 and a 57% increase in the 10 to 24 age group overall" (Bergman, 2023, p.1165). Moreover,

self-harming online behaviours, including sharing images of self-inflicted injuries, particularly

cutting on social media, are common. These images are shared on social media without warning

about graphic content. Such content can potentially encourage and normalize self-harming

behaviour and mental health issues among youths. Saunders and Eaton (2018) indicated that

Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram users had developed a positive relationship between upward

comparison and vulnerability toward psychological disorders among teenagers.

Loss of In-Person Connection and Psychological Distress

I think the increased time spent on social media may also contribute to depressive symptoms in adolescents. Several systematic reviews published in the last ten years have found a connection between increased screen time and worse mental health in adolescents (Sedgwick et al., 2019; Twenge, 2020). Twenge (2020) indicated that between 2011 and 2018, rates of depression increased substantially among adolescents. The authors noted that heavy use of technology leads to depression and mental well-being. They also suggested that it is not only the increase in depression but also results in other psychological disturbances.

Flannery et al. (2023) indicated that teenagers spend a significant amount of time using social media, which leads to a lack of interest in in-person interactions such as going to parties, malls, and the movies than the previous generations. Further, digital use behaviours may result in self-enforcing, cascading effects on psychosocial development, identity crisis, and unhealthy behaviours across adolescents with severe implications for mental health outcomes. However, teenagers can process the use of social media differently. For example, adolescents with pre-existing mental or physical conditions or risk factors for later psychopathology use social media in self-reinforcing ways that could affect their later mental health (Flannery et al., 2023).

The Rationale for Research Topic

Social determinants of health are a crucial part of Socially Just and Culturally Responsive counselling (CRSJ), and social media is one of these determinants. Since social media has become one of the most powerful digital tools for teenagers, it is vital to explore the importance of this emerging topic in research. Adolescents use it not only for sharing their self-expression but also for self-comparison and self-evaluation behaviours (Guo, 2022). However, teenagers can process the use of social media differently. For example, adolescents with pre-existing mental or

physical conditions or risk factors for later psychopathology use social media in self-reinforcing ways that could affect their later mental health (Flannery, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to explore the connections between the use of social media platforms and adolescents' mental and psychological health. To achieve this, it is helpful to consider Eatough & Smith's (2017) depiction of how teenagers live their experiences, their engagement with social media, and how they make meaning with their experiences with social media forums (e.g., Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram). I believe the essence of this study is to understand and amplify the lived experiences of teenagers.

Based on Ivie et al.'s. (2020) and Vannucci et al.'s. (2020) research findings exploring connections between social media use and teenagers' mental health is health psychology's most critical emerging topic. Alexander and Delariarte (2023), Amanda (2020), and Balt et al. (2023) found emerging themes related to social media addiction, dependency, triggers, and imitation and its adversative effects on adolescents' mental health. Smith (1996) suggested that healthy psychology predicts a connection between physical condition, cognition, and verbal responses. Furthermore, it may precisely uncover the nature of connections and be concerned with the chain of connections. Therefore, keeping this in mind, it can be helpful to explore how teenagers describe their experiences with social media and its effects on their physical and mental health differently because this may highlight their subjective perceptual processes.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research include the following:

- To investigate the relationship between social media use and depression and anxiety symptoms in adolescents.

- To develop a guide for the mental health community to consider social media issues while helping teenagers with psychological distress.

Identifies Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Since this topic has gathered research attention, there is little agreement on the overall effect of social media use on teenagers' mental health; some studies indicate positive, and others show adverse effects (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). For a thorough understanding, it is crucial to have more longitudinal studies to provide more concrete results. I also believe that there is a need for more qualitative studies to explore such topics. The number of quantitative studies in literature is substantially higher than that of qualitative studies (Keles et al., 2020). With the help of qualitative studies, the researchers would be able to explore adolescents' personal views and attitudes towards uses and vital motivational factors for social media use. They could examine control processes related to motivations for social media use in youth (Throuvala et al., 2019).

Additionally, dynamic, and inactive social media use may impact emotional health differently, but little is known about whether and to what extent either type of social media use influences emotional distress among adolescents (Rutter et al., 2021; Thorisdottir et al., 2019). Despite the growing body of research dedicated to studying the effects of social media on adolescent mental health, significant research is still underway to show how social media use can be perceived from different perspectives (Medruţ, 2021). On the other hand, it is crucial to understand the individual characteristics of social media use and the biological and environmental basis of problematic use. Shannon et al. (2022) suggested increasing choices to identify healthy ways to use social media since total abstinence may not appear realistic in today's technology-based culture.

Conclusion

This research report provides insight into the avenues through which social media platforms can impact teenagers' mental health and psychological well-being. This concise review focused on the recent findings regarding the suggested connection between social media use and teenagers' mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms, associated psychopathologies, and anxiety. Adolescents in today's world are not used to living in a domain without social media; online communications have become a norm, and the potential benefits of social media, including literacy, self-expression, sense of belonging, social networking, and expanding social circles can not be discounted (Abi-Jaoude, 2020). However, based on this literature review, most studies commonly detected psychological disorders such as depression leading to self-harming behaviour, anxiety, and psychological distress as the primary concerns because of adolescents' prolonged and problematic use of social media.

I recently noticed the demand for digital acts, which require companies to remove illegal content from their websites. Bergman (2023) indicated a universal consensus that social media tools cause injury and bring risks to teenagers. However, social media forums are mainly unregulated by government authorities and courts. Based on the findings from this literature review, I propose that future studies explore the questions mentioned in this study to protect youths from the adverse effects of social media on their mental health. In the literature, I found evidence to promote awareness among professionals and parents to protect youths from the negative impact of social media. Therefore, it is essential to discuss individual and systemic interventions to help teenagers navigate the challenges brought by social media so they can protect themselves from harm and use social media to safeguard their mental health (Abi-Jaoude,

2020). For doing so, it is indispensable to consider individual, environmental, economic, and

family factors relating to nurture and resilience.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a modern qualitative methodology. In 1996, psychologist Jonathan Smith developed IPA. Although IPA is based on psychology, it is highly used by scholars in human, social, and health sciences (Noon, 2018). This method systematically explores how individuals make meaning of their life experiences (Tomkins, 2017, as cited in Noon, 2018). The primary purpose of IPA is to understand individuals' personal and social worlds. There are two commitments of IPA, 'giving voice' and 'making sense of individuals' past and present experiences. The researchers dig into individuals' insider perspectives (Hurley, 2019). For this paper, the researcher will provide a step-by-step understanding and application of the IPA method in qualitative approaches.

According to Eatough and Smith (2017), IPA is a part of phenomenological approaches, which may have different theoretical and methodological focuses but agree about the importance of an experiential perspective for the discipline. Smith et al. (2009), Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, the three well-known pioneers of the IPA approach, described that "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p.1). Further, the authors stated that this approach considers that human beings are sense-making; therefore, individuals' narratives will echo their efforts to make sense of their own experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Alase (2017) believes that IPA is the most "participant-oriented" qualitative method, a study approach that shares respect and sensitivity to the "lived experiences" of the research participants. IPA researchers and participants are mainly involved in understanding participants' lived experiences and interpretative processes. The researcher with this method examines

particulars based on the in-depth account of each individual's experience before finding patterns of convergence and divergence across data (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

In the UK (1990s), IPA was first pronounced as an approach to the psychology of experience in health and clinical/counselling psychology. However, since then, it has expanded its reach. It is one of the best qualitative approaches in UK psychology and is increasingly widened worldwide by psychology researchers. Based on its broader applicability and deep and intensive examination of participants' experiences, the researcher's role is to interpret the meaning individuals assign to their experience, which is central to IPA (Noon, 2018; Pietiewics & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2011).

Moreover, researchers can apply it in diverse fields because of IPA's strong commitment to learning criteria of interest from a participant's perspective and valuing the subjective experience and understanding. Along with these commitments, to keep the original spirit of the study (i.e., understanding, and interpreting participants' lived experiences), IPA strives to establish the evidence that the researcher relies on a creative and imaginative stance (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Finally, while exploring individuals' lived experiences, the IPA as an interpretive, interpersonal, and interactive method has many more characteristics that can provide researchers with the necessary tools and techniques to prepare rich and thick descriptive research (Alase, 2017).

Underlying Philosophical Assumptions

IPA relies upon fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Phenomenology is concerned with human experience, and IPA, as a part of phenomenology, studies the meaning of human experience; hermeneutics is about interpretation and restoring meaning (Ricoeur, 1970, as cited in Noon, 2018), and ideography is a commitment to

understanding individuals 'experiences about a particular phenomenon (Noon, 2018). IPA

researchers aim to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences. Moreover, they

assume that participants are self-interpreting beings. This means that individuals are likely to

engage in interpreting the events, objects, and social interactions in their lives.

Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology as an eidetic method of focusing on how

things appear to individuals in their experiences. In other words, phenomenology pays attention

to how individuals perceive and talk about things and events rather than explaining them

according to predetermined rules. Bracketing requires phenomenologists to recognize and

withhold their preconceptions from interpretations and descriptions of the phenomena

(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). These IPA philosophers observe individuals and how they make

sense of their experiences based on specific variables within their lives and contextual elements

they experience within that world. They also consider how factors such as environment, culture,

or time may influence individuals to derive, interpret and share meaning about their experiences,

providing outside observers a richer understanding of those lived experiences (Smith et al.,

2009).

Hermeneutics

Later, Martin Heidegger explored interpretative hermeneutics, which is related to

phenomenology. Researchers need to understand and interpret the mindsets and language of

individuals who share their experiences in the world. Thus, IPA researchers make meaning

understandable through interpretative activity by translating these. This process is often known

as double hermeneutics or dual interpretation. Since the first participants make sense of their

world, the researcher decodes their meaning to make sense of the subjects' meaning-making.

Ideography

The third principle, ideography, is an analysis of single cases and assessing the individual experiences of research participants). In contrast to nomothetic approaches, which focus on analyzing a group and condensing individual participant data into general claims, the main principle behind the ideographic approach is to examine every case before reaching out to general claims. Also, IPA is committed to focusing on the detail and depth of the particular and exploring the phenomenon and meaning as individually perceived (Smith et al., 2009). So, IPA mainly relies on particular rather than universal (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Pre-study Tasks

Alase (2017) shared that pre-study tasks involve working on research questions that should capture the essence of what the study is trying to explore. These research questions must be grounded in assumptions of the methodology used for the research study. Moreover, the authors suggested adding sub-questions following general central questions, and the wording of these questions must lead to probing and open-ended direction. The other pre-tasks can be related to sampling, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, rigour, and transparency in the research.

Recruitment

To participate in this research, the participants were 18-21 years old, fluent in English, comfortable using MS Teams for one-hour interviews, residents of Canada, and active or past social media users. A poster was shared to recruit participants at gyms, internet cafes, and places close to the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University (Appendix A). However, when the poster was shared on the Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/share/Z5A8ADFft2Ueb1PS/?mibextid=K35XfP), after five minutes

of this post, the primary researcher was spammed with emails. The unlimited number of emails triggered the anti-spam protocol that put the researcher's Athabasca University email account under restriction. When the researcher connected with a few participants via MS Teams, they refused to discuss the eligibility criteria but insisted they were from Canada. However, they were not from Canada and did not qualify for the criteria indicated on the research poster. The link to the Facebook page is shared to spread the word among researchers so they can avoid a possible scam.

Sampling

Smith et al. (2009) recommend a homogenous sample, meaning participants must be selected from a homogenous sample pool to understand the research's true makeup. Smith et al. (2009) indicated that samples must be chosen purposively to better provide the research insight into a particular experience. These samples are smaller in size, and the aim is to find a homogenous sample so that the researcher can examine convergence and divergence in some detail (Smith et al., 2009). However, it also depends on the research topic, which may require a limited number of participants. For example, when there is a less specific topic, the sample may be drawn from individuals with similar demographics or socioeconomic backgrounds. Chapman and Smith (2022) describe this logic: if the researcher interviews 10 participants, it makes no sense to consider a random or representative sample. IPA, therefore, relies on purposive sampling to find a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be necessary. IPA researchers examine how participants make sense of a similar experience.

The participants for the current study were male and female, shared their ethnicity, and were reported to be undergraduate university students aged 18-21, who were recruited using the snowball method. Of the demographic chosen, 99% were social media users. Also, this age

corresponds with the critical period of identity formation and skills (Knight, 2017). Considering

the high percentage of youth users on social media and its effects on their mental health, this

sample was deemed most suitable.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
P1F	Kathy	Female	19	Student	East Asian Canadian
P2M	Nathan	Male	18	Student	Canadian
P3F	Zainab	Female	20	Student	Afghan Canadian
P4F	Aihan	Female	19	Student	Asian Canadian
P5M	Steve	Male	20	Student	Canadian
P6M	Hanif	Male	21	Student	Pakistani Canadian

Data Collection

Data was collected, using semi-structured interviews guided by an interview guide

(Appendix B). Video meetings were arranged with each participant individually using Microsoft

Teams, and only the interviewer and the participant were present. The interview was developed

collaboratively with two experienced clinicians/professors. The interview guide was meant to be

used flexibly, with a combination of open-ended questions and follow-up probes to facilitate the

exploration of participants' own experiences. All participants received a $25 Amazon e-gift card

as a thank-you for their participation.

All interviews were video recorded, and the primary researcher maintained a reflective

diary and notes from the interviews, aiding the analytic procedure. The mean interview duration

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was 60 minutes (30-100 minutes). A total of 306 minutes of interview material was collected. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher to assist immersion in the data, anonymized to ensure confidentiality and stored in a password-protected encrypted database.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo 14 for data management purposes and to perform the qualitative coding procedure. Nvivo is a qualitative software management system that stores and manages data. IPA does not follow a single prescriptive method or linear analysis process. While iterative and inductive cycles are expected to IPA, researchers are encouraged to be creative and flexible in examining and interpreting the data (Smith et al., 2009).

As a novice researcher, I followed IPA's six-stage process to analyze the data, which begins with the individual transcript. These are (1) active engagement/familiarisation, (2) initial note-taking, (3) documenting codes and emergent themes, (4) connecting themes, (5) repeating the process for each new case, and (6) finding patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Familiarisation

The first stage involved data familiarisation when I started reviewing and carefully listening to the video recording while reading the first written transcript of each interview. This refreshed my memory about what occurred during the interview, helped me understand participants' lived experiences, and assisted me with interpretations, which was the primary focus (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). I arranged additional readings of each transcript for content analysis, understanding, and interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

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Working on Notes

I underlined sections of each transcript that stood out to me during stage two. I worked on hand-written notes in the margins to record potentially significant observations and thoughts expressed regarding specific interview questions, interesting topics, sensitive responses, frameworks, and other noteworthy ideas (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). I aimed to keep an open mind during this analytical note-taking process to support a more comprehensive understanding of how each participant felt and shared meaning about their experiences. I covered specific details from the transcript in my notes to help the next steps in my analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I also developed notes about reflections and inquiries that I would later work through in my reflexive journal. After I had revisited the transcript multiple times, I examined my initial notes. I developed a separate section to support more interpretative documentation based on different conceptual levels of understanding and interrogative reflection (Smith et al., 2009).

Developing Codes

Stage three includes developing codes at a descriptive and conceptual level. During this process, I continuously revisited each transcript to finalize the codes identified and explore for unidentified ones. I started observing contradictions, similarities, differences, repetitions, and hesitations. Keywords and phrases used in the coding scheme include social comparisons, body image, self-esteem, influencers, social media plat forums (i.e., TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Discord), peer pressure, addiction, fear of missing out, anxiety, stress, depression, psychological distress, inappropriate content, graphic images, child grooming, extensive hours, exposure, adaptation, scam, unhealthy, and mental health.

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Emergent Themes

After developing codes, I aimed to capture participants' thoughts and my interpretation of them. With the help of initial notes, I moved from codes to themes. My notes seemed reflective at this stage and captured some strong understanding (Smith &Osborn, 2015). I examined evolving themes and organized them chronologically as they emerged in the data. This assisted me with organizing my analysis. While innovating and exploring how I wanted to organize my analysis, I removed the themes that no longer fit the script.

Connecting Themes

I explored patterns and connections across experiential records/ emergent themes to cluster them according to conceptual similarities or differences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Repeating the process, I moved to the following transcript for stage four and repeated steps one to three to maintain their individuality (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I needed to re-label and identify the most compelling themes (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I narratively developed each theme by sharing details about findings and providing an excerpt with its analytic interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I started finding the experiential statements I had put in different groups and then used different coloured highlighters to identify which statements seemed to fit together. After multiple reiterations of this process, I developed overarching statements that reflected the main themes. (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Numerous themes emerged through this process with each participant, which required me to analyze further similarities and differences among them. As a result, I could identify central themes and connected sub-themes that more clearly appeared as the most significant facets of the participant's account (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Recurring Process

For IPA's idiographic commitment, I viewed each subsequent transcript as its unique case (Smith et al., 2009). During this stage, I bracketed the ideas that emerged in the first transcript so that new ideas could appear during the second transcript I am focusing on (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Once a detailed analysis of the first participant's transcript had been done, I conducted separate analyses that employed the same processes for each of the following accounts. According to IPA's idiographic commitment, I treated each subsequent transcript as its own unique case (Smith et al., 2009).

Cross-Case Analysis

After all transcripts/interviews had been individually analyzed, I worked on cross-case analyses to expand theoretical and conceptual understandings of the phenomena being examined. Further, I looked for patterns and connections across transcripts by examining shared potentials amongst the themes and participant accounts and exploring the possible relevance of unique characteristics that differed between participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). I then identified final themes and subthemes based on re-occurring areas of focus and converging ideas or experiences. I also aimed to recognize and bring attention to any significant outliers.

Rigour

Dabengwa et al. (2023) describe rigour as trustworthiness and quality criteria that qualitative studies must follow to acquire confidence in their results. The authors explained that rigour is examined using validity, reliability, and generalizability factors. Validity denotes the importance of participants' experiences shared by participants instead of the researcher, reliability refers to research tools measuring what they were supposed to, and generalizability is about transferring study results to other current studies (Sandelowski, 1986, as cited in

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Dabengwa et al., 2023). However, Smith et al. (2009) define rigour as research diligence—for example, the sample's appropriateness, interview structure quality, and data analysis completeness.

To ensure the analysis was rigorous and minimized the potential for bias, the primary researcher maintained a reflexive diary and conducted a pilot test of the interview guide during the data collection, coding, analyzing, and theming stages. The study was conducted by the quality guidelines for qualitative studies, including four rules: sensitivity to data, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Debengwa et al., 2023).

A homogenous sample was recruited to maintain commitment and rigour, belonging to a similar age group, and recruited within the same city. Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance for quality and validity was followed to increase the trustworthiness of data analysis. Step by step, a sensitive approach was adopted for the interview process, including making participants at ease, avoiding jargon, prompting participants' agency, and ending the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee. Also, sensitivity was applied during the data analysis process. Transparency refers to the clarity of describing the stages in the research process. Transparency was adopted by providing specific details of selecting participants, constructing the interview schedule, conducting interviews, and conducting data analysis. For coherence, this study was consistent with the underlying principles of IPA: attending closely to participants' experiential claims and, at the same time, manifesting the interpretative activity of IPA (Shinebourne, 2011).

Ethical Considerations in IPA

Wagstaff et al. (2014) indicated that the deeply personal nature of individual experiences often examined in IPA studies might lead to dilemmas for researchers seeking ethical approval

for research proposals. The authors shared concerns about researchers and the aftermath of listening to traumatic and tragic participants' stories. Moreover, they believe there is a potential risk of power abuse within IPA studies. The researcher received ethical approval for this research from Athabasca University's Research Ethics Board (Appendix C). Further, by creating a safe space, the researcher tried to address the power imbalances between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Brook-Rowland and Finlay (2023) proposed that participants, institutions, or areas under study must acquire ethical approval to minimize this abuse. Further, participants provided consent for the researcher to use direct quotes and if they want to be audio or video recorded. As an IPA researcher, I ensured that participants understood every clause in the informed consent. Further, I provided participants with an option for counselling services and ensured their well-being during and after the research study. During the interview, I build rapport with participants, ask them about their feelings, and respond to their emotions. After the interview, I asked them to reflect on appropriate support if they need. Düvell et al. (2009) encourage qualitative researchers to look for risks, benefits, privacy, and confidentiality.

Reflexivity and the Role of IPA Researcher

IPA studies are a dynamic process in which the researchers play an active role that may influence the process by which they access the participants' experiences and how, with the help of interpretative activity, they make meaning of the participants' world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). O'Sullivan et al. (2021) suggested that in the light of the IPA method, the main focus is to understand the subjective lived experiences of individuals. So, the researcher proved reflexivity while taking part in this study. The authors further indicated that reflexivity leads to developing

cognitive complexity in researchers, and then they assess how their assumptions may impact the research process.

As an IPA researcher, I maintained the quality of the research by explicitly considering the data analysis, which buffers against personal worldviews and biases impacting the research findings. Finally, keeping Brook-Rowland and Finlay's (2023) suggestions at the forefront, I maintained a reflexive log to be proactive about bracketing off my assumptions, which may have an essential place in the researcher's academic research in psychology.

Strengths of IPA

The IPA method recognizes subjective experience efficacy as scientific data (Bus et al., 2016, as cited in Noon, 2018). Thus, it is suitable for approaches exploring persons' unique experiences. Noon (2018) considers it a valuable method for those whose voices may otherwise go unheard, such as individuals from non-dominant populations, online/distance learners, and those struggling with mental disorders. Keeping this in mind, a diverse sample was selected for this study. Open-ended questions facilitated the researcher to explore participants' social worlds, so this method is known as data-driven rather than theory-driven (Griffith, 2008 as cited in Noon, 2018). It is a non-prescriptive, flexible approach (Noon, 2018).

IPA can be helpful in clinical psychology and psychotherapy because its strengths can be purposeful for cultural and indigenous communities. Moreover, it was used to examine participants' spiritual experiences or religious practices and the meaning assigned to them. Psychologists with migration and acculturation experience (e.g., the researcher) found IPA beneficial to explore various ethnic groups' beliefs that helped her understand clients' identities, the meaning they attributed to social roles, and how they made sense of phenomena as described in (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Chapman and Smith (2022) described IPA as a source for studying a detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts. The author shared that the main objective of IPA is to examine the perceptions and understandings of the specific group studied rather than make more general claims. Eatough and Smith (2017) suggested IPA as idiographic because it starts with a particular and examines whether any generalizations are embedded in it. So, for this research, instead of making a general claim, the study aimed to explore teenagers'/youth's perceptions and understanding of social media.

Further, I did not want to take either/or stance; instead, I wanted to ensure the intensive examination of teenagers in their own right as an intrinsic part of the digital era. Then, the intention was to reach Eatough and Smith's (2017) logical route to universal laws to understand the centrality of specific general themes in the lives of all particular teenagers. The authors believe IPA researchers bring together noticeable aspects of the general world by connecting the individual's unique life with a shared humanity. So, the aim was to place aspects of general teenagers' experiences closer by connecting them to each adolescent's unique life. The IPA researcher wanted to work with a homogenous sample (e.g., teenagers, location, and students) to achieve this. The more homogenous a sample was, the more valid the conclusions drawn from that small population were.

Since semi-structured interviews can be the best method for IPA data analysis, the researcher aimed to engage with teenagers in a dialogue whereby initial questions were discussed in light of their use of social media. Then, the objective was to probe exciting and essential themes further as they emerged during our conversation. During this process, the purpose was to follow Chapman and Smith's (2022) advice about maintaining a map that may guide possible

ways the interview may proceed. Finally, a map of emerging themes can be discussed with exact participant excerpts.

Limitations of IPA

The main concern in IPA is to focus on each participant's experience, which may result in a time-consuming case-by-case analysis in a smaller sample. However, the researcher studied more general accounts for this study and selected a sample of a decent size. According to Noon (2018), IPA leaves participants with weak language skills. As a result, their experiences can be dismissed or misunderstood; in such cases, other methods could be a better choice. Therefore, the researcher had to ensure that her findings were balanced. Moreover, with this method, there may be concerns about the representativeness and transferability of results. Because in IPA research, general claims can be made (Noon, 2018).

Next, when different team members examined data, it resulted in refined insight. Since each member of this team possesses a unique interpretive lens, with many lenses, there can be many complexities. Noon (2018) proposes that researchers actively create opportunities to join with members who have experienced the phenomena under study rather than researching participants (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Despite the validity of unlimited literature on IPA, this is still a new approach; therefore, many researchers struggle with making decisions around sample size, grappling with ethical issues arising from the research focus, and appropriately implementing the underlying assumptions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

Chapter 4. Findings

Based on the results of this study, social media has some positive impacts, but the negatives are strong. The helpful impacts of social media include what adolescents in this study reported: connections and communications with friends and family that make them feel better and happier. They believe that friendships, connecting with family, and approval from their loved ones are essential, and social media helps them achieve these aspects of their lives. Some participants indicated they could have virtual tours of places they could not see in person through social media. Also, according to some participants, social media saves them money they used to spend on making telephone calls to their friends and relatives living overseas. Also, for a few of them, social media brings humour, entertainment, and fun during dull and isolating moments.

Based on their study's results, Bitto Urbanova et al. (2023) suggested that teenagers perceived social media as a primarily supportive and helpful tool. The potential benefits of digital technology must be exposed to public view and policy (Bitto Urbanova et al., 2023).

This research aimed to explore the connections between social media and psychological disorders among youth. Quantitative methods dominate the research world without considering participants' rich, detailed, subjective experiences. For this study, IPA was used to understand the social media users' experiences and how they impact their mental health. Six adolescents/young adults from different areas across a Canadian city with more than a million people were interviewed. Participants were aged 18-21 years; the mean age of the six participants was 19. All adolescents lived independently and were undergraduate students, including three males and three females. The ethnicity of the adolescents (n = 6) varied: Asian Canadian (n = 1), Pakistani Canadian (n = 1), Canadian (n = 2), East Asian Canadian (n = 1), and Afghani Canadian (n = 1).

After conducting the IPA, several themes emerged from the transcripts. The central

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theme summarised participants' lived experiences of social media and its impact on their mental

health. The six themes that emerged were the impacts of social media on youths, social

comparisons and self-esteem issues in female teenagers, addiction to social media and fear of

missing out, influencers' impact on youths, social media use in pre-teenagers, and peer pressure.

These are discussed here, as well as codes/subthemes, with reference to extracts from the

interview transcripts and relevant theory and literature. Below is the project map exported from

NVivo 14 to indicate the social media platforms widely used by youths.

Figure 2

A Project Map (Exported from NVivo14)
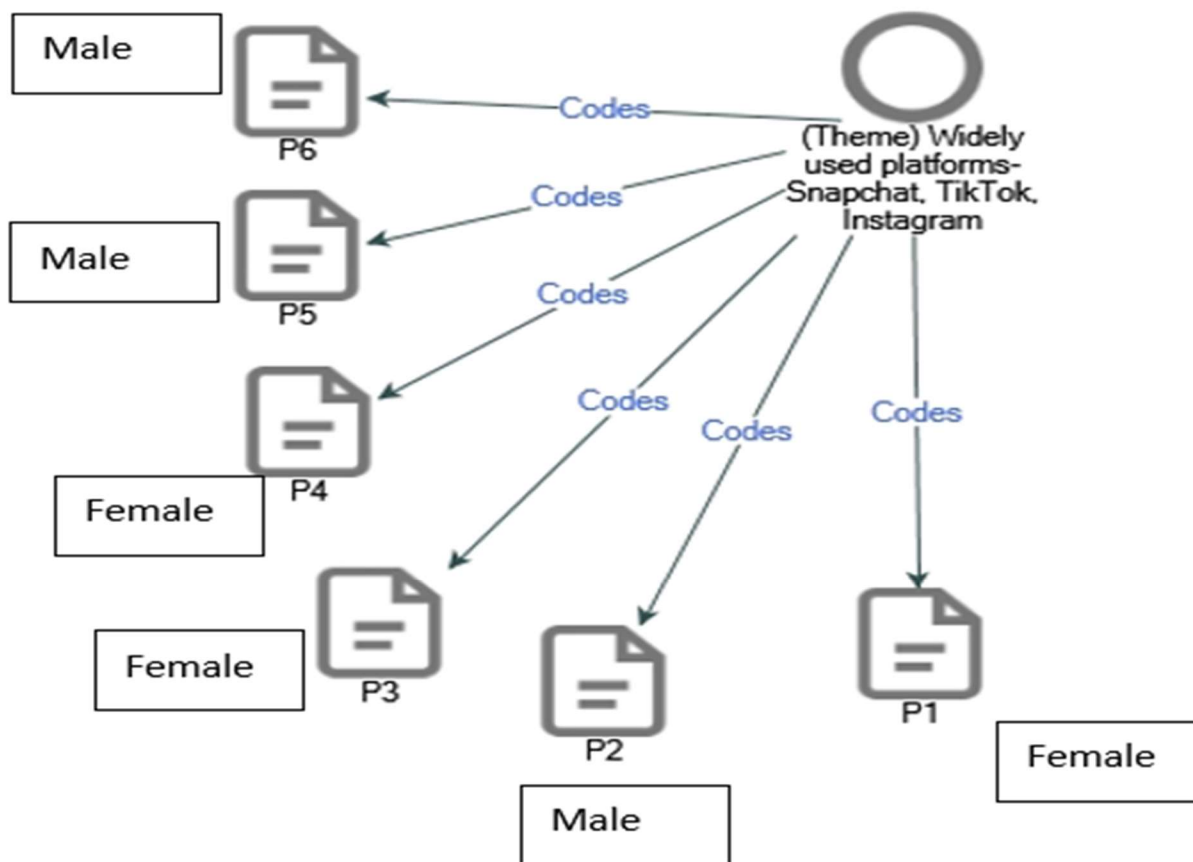
Theme One: Impacts of Social Media on Youths

Analysis of the transcripts revealed the central theme: the impacts of social media and four subthemes, including exposure to graphic content, adaptability to unhealthy materials, user concerns about social media and illegal practices on Discord, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, and the adverse effects of social media on mental health, are discussed under the central theme. These subthemes highlighted some compounding factors that can have a harmful impact on the mental health of young people. The connection between social media and psychological disorders among youth is complex.

Exposure to Graphic Content

The subordinate theme reveals the participant's experience with accessibility to disturbing images available on social media, and these pictures make her sad.

Current stuff such as, like, you know, children being covered in blood or, you know, there are actual deceased children or people. It is very heartbreaking. Umm, did that a lot of that stuff? So yeah, it is very saddening. More recently, quite a few videos or pictures that do not have that warning have been released, and they are probably just as graphic. (Kathy 15:08)

Kathy shared her preference for staying updated on world affairs. However, coverage on social media about the Israel-Palestine war and gruesome pictures of affected areas make her feel heartbroken. Memon et al. (2018) indicated that users are receiving negative messages on social media promoting depression, self-harm, copying the self-injurious behaviour of others, and adopting self-harm practices from shared images.

Adaptability to Unhealthy Materials

Kathy reveals her discomfort while watching violent images/videos on social media. However, she still wants "to click to look at it". "I like to keep watching videos. This causes obsessions. I keep seeing different stuff. It is not good, but I still do it sometimes. Umm" (Kathy 15:10). These quotes from Kathy indicate that her adaptation to the materials/content seems unhealthy for her mental health.

Users' Concerns About Social Media and Illegal Practices on Discord, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram

According to Steve, he has encountered dangerous people who shared inappropriate content with him. As a young social media user, he did not know how to block or stop them [After running into such people, he developed mistrust of people].

> Umm, it is not always people with good intentions who are on social media, and you must always keep that in mind. You are going to have people, no matter what, who will criticize you. There are literally people on social media who are only there to harm you (Steve 16:33).

According to their accounts, Kathy and Nathan have experienced many illegal activities on multiple social media platforms. Kathy indicated she could avoid inappropriate content on TikTok and Instagram without warning. However, Nathan found many underage users on Discord, where they can meet people who can be predators.

Participants' quotes highlight these unlawful activities on social media. "TikTok, I have seen that every once in a while. I do get videos, but those do not have any warnings. Also, I mostly get that kind of information from Instagram" (Kathy 17:04).

So, what often happens on Discord is that people will try to scam you (Nathan 7:10). I

know that on Discord and Snapchat, which I use a lot, there are many kids under 13. I

know what goes on in the shadier areas of the app, and it is not good. There are people on

Discord who will groom kids and share sexual messages, and it is vile behaviour. You do

not know if they are a 19-year-old girl or a 50-year-old man. (Nathan 7:13)

The interesting finding from this study was that Discord, an online gaming forum, is used

by child predators to lure potential victims, child sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. Craven et

al. (2007) describe online grooming as a process in which a person prepares a child, youth, and

the environment for the sexual abuse. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining

compliance, and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. Research indicates that

Discord was initially developed for gaming. Based on the accounts of Nathan, Discord is used as

a social media platform for child grooming. Further, the challenge lies in the insufficient

vigilance of the youngest users and their guardians. So, younger populations become subject to

abuse by *online predators* (Van der Sanden et al., 2022).

Adverse Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

Kathy, Nathan, Steve, and Hanif shared their personal experiences with how social media

impacted their mental health. "Images from Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I guess one of the things

that's taking a toll on my mental health is that it makes me sad" (Kathy 10:12). For Kathy,

"violent images" on social media lead to "depression". She also indicated that other images make

her sad because she finds others happier in these images than her own self. "It negatively impacts

your mental health due to, you know, maybe seeing people that, you know, far better well off

than you or, you know, just look happier" (Kathy 10:35).

> Like people wanting you to look a certain way, so, you are sacrificing your health to
> appeal to them and create the image they want. And it just. You end up getting to a point
> where you are just trying to appeal to. The same group of people. This can lead to
> depression. Anxiety. Stress. Even just like not taking care of yourself, just neglecting
> your health because of what people say, like, ohh. (Steve 15:00)

Steve and Hanif indicated the "idolized" body image created on social media. To achieve this image, they reveal that users compromise their health and become stressed and frustrated. "So, it kind of messes up your brain in that sense" (Hanif 29:32).

> Yes, I would like to say that what I have actually found in my life is that social media has
> been kind of like I have ADHD already. So, my attention span is minuscule, so social
> media makes that small amount of attention span. (Nathan 14:25)

Based on his current health condition, social media impacts Nathan's attention span.

Kathy shared her experiences with encountering inappropriate content on TikTok. Such content made her feel unhappy and depressed. She also shared her peers' experiences with pressured texting of their self-images. According to Ringrose et al. (2023), young people's nonconsensual image-sharing practices are forms of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. The authors introduced the term image-based sexual harassment (IBSH) to describe unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyber flashing or unsolicited dick pics) and unwanted solicitation for sexual images (e.g. pressured sexting), and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) to refer to the non-consensual recording and distribution of sexual images (Ringrose et al., 2023).

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Figure 3

Word cloud based on Transcripts Files

Theme Two: Social Comparisons and Self-Esteem Issues in Female Teenagers

This study explored the lived experiences of six participants, three female teenagers, who shared ideas about their self-image. The findings showed connections between social media use and negative feelings of self-worth developed because of participation in social media. According to Aihan, she realized that she was "internally making upward comparisons" with the hope of looking like the *models* shown in shared images on social media, and this affected her mental health.

> Moreover, people do not post things they do not want you to see on social media. It is
>
> very filtered, and it is straightforward to scroll on Instagram behind the screen, for
>
> example, they see somebody's picture and say, wow, I wish I looked like that. I wish I
>
> had that life, and it can take a toll on your mental health because, like, I feel like many
>
> people are less insecure if they stop comparing themselves to the version of other people
>
> they see on social media. (Aihan 38:51)

According to Kathy, "You are always comparing to someone, or you are always seeing someone doing better than you" (Kathy 10:57).

For Aihan, the availability of "Photoshop and other options that help change one's real image creates false and fake pictures in the girls' mind. (Aihan 11:03)

Yeah, the filters are accessible on pretty much any social media platform like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, and people can alter their appearance to make themselves look better. So that is like another layer to making people insecure and taking a toll on mental health. (Aihan 40:28)

She also indicated:

Children who are people of colour look at these white-blonde Instagram models and are like oh, I wish I could look like that. Also, I would look at myself as a pretty small Asian girl. Or I would say my little prayers before bed that I wake up looking completely different. (Aihan 40:28)

According to Zainab, she has to constantly remind herself that she can not compare herself to the girls shown on social media.

At the beginning of TikTok, I knew that when I followed people or saw these pretty girls on my news feed, they all looked the same, and if I did not look like that, it actually did make me upset. (Zainab 18:37)

Based on the results from their meta-analysis, Grabe et al. (2008) indicated that exposure to social media images depicting thin or idolized body images leads to dissatisfaction, comparisons, eating disorders, and body image concerns for the female population. Based on the results from his study, Carpenter (2023) suggests that there are strong connections between TikTok use and anxiety, depression, and body image among youths, and specific subgroups may

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be at enlarged risk for negative outcomes related to their TikTok use. Based on this study's results, female participants were more engaged in social media use and had lower body esteem than male participants.

As a member of a minority group, Aihan indicated her ideas about social comparisons with white models. Pula (2014) suggested a great need to understand body image symptomatology by culture, examining how women from diverse ethnic backgrounds evaluate their bodies beyond the global measure of satisfied versus dissatisfied.

White skin has been idealized in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cultures as a sign of upper social-class status, femininity, and purity. On the other hand, Dark skin has been viewed as a product of a lower-class field labourer and is therefore not valued traditionally (Bray, 2002; Kawamura & Rice, 2011). For Asian Americans, the issue of skin tone may further contribute to an internal upholding of traditional values and trying to assimilate into western cultural values, which may lead to internalized racism and a devaluing of one's own physical appearance (Kawamura & Rice, 2011).

Theme Three: Addiction to Social Media and Fear of Missing out (FOMO)

This theme reveals that excessive time spent on social media indicates FOMO and social media addiction. Griffiths et al. (2017) suggested that FOMO may be a significant predictor or possible component of potential social media addiction. Nathan indicated having challenges limiting his time spent on social media because he wants to be constantly in touch with his friends, which impacted his productivity.

I have been trying to cut down on the infinite scrolling stuff. I like funny videos, which I

try to avoid because they are like an endless pit. You start scrolling the videos and like,

oh, this is funny. And then two hours goes by. I can see why they spent so much time; it

is so addicting, and I cannot blame them. (Nathan 2:46)

Based on Zainab's accounts, the main goal was "not to miss any part of group chats".

Therefore, the habit of spending unlimited hours on social media was developed. "I do spend

quite a lot, and I am not sure if it is good for my mental health. I do not know how to estimate it"

(Zainab 2:03). Hanif stated he deleted TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram when he realized that

"endless hours" spent on these forms were affecting his mental health. "It just keeps pumping

dopamine and heightens your mood. It can cause psychological disorders" (Hanif 41:32).

Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2021) and Magner (2018) showed that there had been an

increase in concerns about teens' vulnerability to social media addiction. The authors suggested

that Canadian teenagers widely use Snapchat, which has become an increasingly socially

compelled addictive behaviour, including a fear of losing connections and missing out. Based on

this study, I found codes and themes such as addiction to social media, lack of fact-to-face

connection, and fear of missing out. Flannery (2023) indicated that teens spend a significant

amount of time using social media, which leads to a lack of interest in in-person interactions

such as going to parties, malls, and the movies than the previous generations. Further, digital use

behaviours may result in self-enforcing, cascading effects on psychosocial development, identity

crisis, and unhealthy behaviours across adolescents with severe implications for mental health

outcomes.

Theme Four: Influencers' Impact on Youth

According to Lajnef (2023), youth identity formation is deeply affected by the intense appearance of influencers in teenagers' lives. The transcripts reveal that multiple participants had influencers who impacted their self-image. For example, according to Hanif:

> So it is hard to avoid them. People see how much money they have, which does not seem real. Much money, but. So now everyone wants to be influencers because they have so much money. So, it feels like you are not doing anything if it does not feel like an actual. Really. Moreover, you develop an almost self-deprecating mindset where you are like, I want to have that good, perfect life now. (Hanif 18:11)

Aihan also shares the theme of low self-esteem and concerns for younger users who can be "negatively impacted by influencers".

> Everybody is influenced to a degree; for example, I have friends who follow popular influencers or like Instagram models and almost idolize them. The little 10-year-olds want to be like that and do not understand what it takes to get there. (Aihan 24: 25)

Similarly, Zainab started using social media at a very young age, and influencers appeared very powerful. So, Zainab described being involved in unattainable tasks to look like influencers. "Influencers were like a big thing. Who created an illusion in my mind? At least it was just like celebrities" (Zainab 5:41).

Social media influencers represent a new type of independent third-party supporter who influences viewers' attitudes through blogs, tweets, and different social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011). Influencers control and influence consumer behaviour, especially among young people and teenagers (Marwick, 2013; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to the results of this study, it can be a social media influencer with a great ability to persuade. The participants in this

study went through unattainable tasks to acquire the idolized self-image and social status like the influencers they saw on social media. The influencers pushed participants to strive for impossible beauty and fit body standards. Their attractiveness and activities affected participants' interests, desires, and mental health. The findings confirm that influencers significantly influence teenagers, shaping their perceptions and behaviours and affecting their mental well-being. For a substantial portion of this study's sample, the impact was negative, contributing to skewed perceptions and diminished self-worth.

Theme Five: Social Media Uses in Pre-teenagers

Many participants in this study advised that social media use among pre-teenagers can hurt their mental health. Nathan suggested that "social media should not be accessible to kids under the age of at least 16. "A 16-year-old would have more self-control and awareness than an eight or 13-year-old regarding social media and instant gratification". Nathan also indicated that sometimes users from this age group join servers owned by creepy owners who would send them "sexual messages" that are rude and inappropriate and may reinforce or trigger earlier traumas.

Zainab 22:45 reported "a lack of security and rules on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube where children around 13 or under can access unfiltered stuff". "You can see anything on there and then, especially for a young person. It is just like you cannot control what they watch since everything is on there. Like, there are YouTube shorts". She also indicated experiencing challenges with being exposed to "obscene and indecent videos, inappropriate content, and images as a young user". In her late teenage years, she was not as concerned about such things as she was when she was young.

Another participant who started using social media at a very young age is Aihan. She reported having a series of redundant exposures to sexual content and videos in childhood. When

the participant thinks about using social media at a young age, "since I was 13, it has almost been like they have robbed me of having an innocent childhood. Moreover, social media, influencers, and everything you see online are almost forcing kids to grow up too early" (Aihan 1:41)**.**

The participants advise that early social media use can be problematic because it can create safety and security issues for younger users.

As an older sibling, Hanif wants to keep his younger siblings away from social media. Based on his early experiences with social media, he thinks that initially, social media helps everyone connect, "It is like you got to talk with friends. You get to see all these videos and stuff, but it slowly, slowly kills you mentally" (Hanif 23:45). Therefore, the participant suggests "children and pre-teenagers should say no to that till like you are older and stuff. So, you understand a little bit, yeah". Hanif also indicated that kids are impressionable during this age, and their prefrontal lobe is still developing. So, they need to reach a level of maturity to protect themselves from online dangers.

Pangrazio and Cardozo- Gaibisso (2023) suggest educating pre-teenagers and teenagers to manage and protect their personal data using social media platforms and artificial intelligence. According to many participants in this study, using social media without parental permission under the age of 13 can endanger preadolescents. They revealed that falsifying age has become a common practice by some teenagers, which risks the safety of younger underage users. Aihan shared her remorse for being on social media at a young age. Because of exposure to inappropriate content on social media, the participant felt robbed of her childhood.

Dunn et al. (2023); Livingston and Bober (2004); O'Malley (2023) reported a large number of children who admit to being exposed to pornography and some online harassment. Based on their own early experiences with social media, Aihan and Hanif suggest young users

avoid using social media platforms; they do not have awareness about these forums, and it can risk their safety and may expose them to sexual content. Adolescents who experience sexual solicitation online (though not necessarily from an adult) may feel upset, afraid, embarrassed, and stressed; be unable to stop thinking about the incident, jumpy or irritable; lose interest in things; engage in substance misuse; and experience depressive symptomatology (Whittle., 2014)

Theme Six: Peer Pressure

Nathan, Zainab, Steve, and Hanif's accounts indicated that they became a part of social media because of "peer pressure". All of these participants used the term peer pressure. Nathan 16:17 revealed, "after feeling peer pressure, I spent three years with these people every day. Basically, I could not connect with them". Zainab 6:26 shared feelings of "loneliness" because she found that no one would like to connect with her without social media. However, once she had it, it affected her negatively. "So, it just felt like lonely at the same time. Seeing these things that I do not have, like, makes me beat myself down for it. So, it is like how it affected my mental health".

For Steve, joining social media was more like a "psychological" trap developed by his peers.

> It felt like I was their puppet. It felt like they were pulling the strings, and I just kind of. It made me also feel unreal. Yeah, I have many regrets for allowing myself to do it. Yeah. Like falling into that trap and not immediately realizing this is not a good headspace (Steve 3:24).
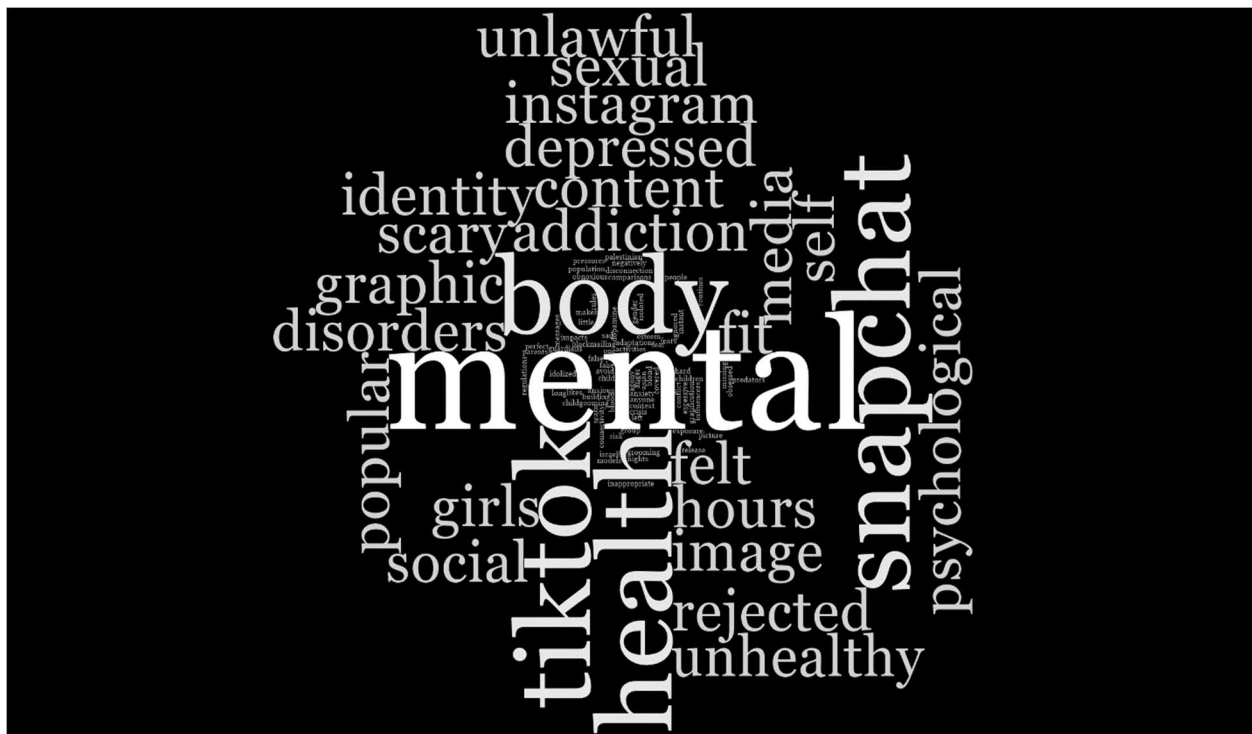
Further, the participant indicated that he joined Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok because of peer pressure, which impacted his mental health.

Hanif 38:49 shared the same ideas about having social media platforms. "It was mainly just Snapchat and Instagram. Everyone had it, so I said, Ok, yeah, I will get it too". Hartikainen et al. (2021) indicated that teenagers feel pressure to engage in social media with fears that their dating partner or friends reject them if they do not engage in social media. The authors described that some adolescents revealed that their partners broke up with them after they did not comply with their demands. The participants in this study reported that social media is all over the place and hard to avoid. They joined social media because of peer pressure, which appeared inconsequential initially, yet later they encountered significant stressful or hurtful events associated with social media platforms.

Figure 4.

Word cloud based on Emerging Themes

Chapter 5. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to provide a deep interpretative account of the influence of adolescents' lived experiences on social media and their mental health. Participants' experiences were divided into six themes: the impacts of social media on youths and subthemes, social comparisons and self-esteem issues in female teenagers, addiction to social media and fear of missing out (FOMO), Influencers' impact on youths, social media use in pre-teenagers, and peer pressure.

The data analysis points out the range of negative experiences that the youths had on social media as well as how they made meaning of the impact of these experiences on their mental health. Negative experiences, including exposure to inappropriate/graphic content, adaptation to unhealthy content available on social media, negative impact of influencers, encounters with illegal activities on Discord, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, and the weight of evidence in each theme directed toward psychological stress, sadness, peer pressure, fear of missing out, lack of in-person connections, depression, obsessions, social comparisons, low self-esteem, addiction to social media, and risk-taking behaviours.

The study aimed to explore connections between social media, notably Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube. However, as indicated in Chapter 5, the interesting finding from this study was that Discord, an online gaming form, is used by criminals to trap vulnerable populations, child sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. Further, the participant's responses revealed strong connections between psychological distress and inappropriate content available on Instagram.

The strongest motives for using social media were the need to belong, content sharing, developing connections, peer pressures, fitting in, and keeping up with the demands of the digital era. For example, several adolescents in this study reported, "Without having social media, they

felt left out and isolated. They joined social media to fit in, and it was out of control after some time. It became hard for them to track the number of hours they spent on social media".

Eaton (2018) indicates that teenagers are negatively affected by the excessive use of social media. Most importantly, as the findings from this study showed, the tactics used by different social media platforms, notably Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, are contributing to mental addiction among teenagers. Moreover, Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2021) and Magner (2018) showed that there had been an increase in concerns about teenagers' vulnerability to social media addiction. The authors suggested that Canadian teenagers widely use Snapchat, which has become an increasingly socially compelled addictive behaviour, including a fear of losing connections and missing out.

Although adolescents engaged in active and passive social media use practices, most participants in this study reported being active users when they were pre-teen. They also noted that active use impacted their mental health. Many indicated they did not know how to maintain safety and security around social media use. Moreover, they did not know how to stop when they came across inappropriate images/videos/content, which had adverse effects on their mental health. As older siblings, these participants advise their younger siblings and pre-teenagers that "social media should not be accessible to users under 16 years of age".

Several participants in this study shared their experiences of seeing many children under the age of 13 using social media forms such as Discord. They indicated that this happens because of a lack of rules and regulations around these platforms; juvenile users join these forms and become victims of predators. The participant believes that children may be at risk of joining the servers owned by "creepy owners" who send them "sexual messages" that can share the content with children that could trigger past traumas. Almost all participants suggested promoting

awareness among professionals and parents to protect children/preteenagers from these negative

impacts of social media. Based on their results from a meta-analysis, Madigan et al. (2018)

indicated that approximately one in five youth encounter unwanted online exposure to sexually

explicit material and one in nine youth experience sexual solicitation. To prevent this, the authors

highlighted the importance of educational campaigns to raise awareness of social media risks and

the safety strategies required (Madigan et al., 2018).

However, passive use in female and male participants tended toward negative self-image

and social comparisons, which in turn increased levels of anxiety and depression. Male

participants would want to match up with the energy of bodybuilders, as shown in videos on

Instagram or TikTok. Even after working nonstop on fitness routines, when they would not meet

the standards of the "fitness world," they would feel anxious and depressed. Young men feel

dissatisfied because they compare themselves to bodybuilders, models, and social media

influencers on social media platforms (Grover et al., 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2019; Tiggemann &

Anderberg, 2020). Teenagers aspire to look like bodybuilders, celebrities, and health and fitness

social media influencers. While inspired by influencers, they internalize the social media

promoted muscled and buff ideal (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). As a result, these young men

negatively judge their current looks during internalization, leading to possible self-esteem

problems (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). The participants in this study revealed a tendency to

follow health and fitness social media influencers and ignore medical advice real experts offer in

the area.

Female participants shared some triggers with engaging in social media that make them

feel even worse. *The perfect body image* on social media promotes social comparisons and

makes them feel "less attractive". One of the participants reported that *she would go to bed with*

a prayer that the following day, she would wake up as a skinny blond girl. This study revealed that youth who were involved in upward or negative social comparisons, particularly female teenagers, had adverse effects of social media on their mental health. Saunders and Eaton (2018) indicated that TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram users had developed a positive relationship between upward comparison and disordered eating consequences.

The findings of this study suggest that watching influencers on social media impacts adolescents' mental health differently depending on how they compare themselves and how they perceive influencers. One of the participants reported having negative feelings when he engages with influencers' videos. These videos would create a mix of feelings in adolescents, for example, lacking the skill to make the money influencers make. This promotes social comparisons that would lead to anxiety and depression.

Social media influencers refer to a group of individuals with no prior fame, and then they gain popularity using one or several social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011). Alves de Castro et al. (2021) indicated that social media influencers promote their products among a specific target audience for economic gains. They have millions of followers. They have an essential role in influencing teenagers in a variety of ways. Psychologists have been warning about the negative impact of influencers on adolescents. After watching influencers promoting unhealthy food, alcoholic drinks, and poor nutritional quality food, teenagers become targets of the United States food industry, which spends more than US$1.6 billion a year on this specific audience (Alves de Castro et al., 2021). Further, the idealistic posts and trends created by social media influencers might cause envy due to the exposure of attractive attributes (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Lau (2017) and Yang (2016), based on the results from their studies, indicated that the mortality rate due to mental health issues caused by social media usage has also been

increasing. The main reason for this can be the social pressure to follow trends and keep up with anything or everything posted by social media influencers (Myers et al., 2012).

Earlier in this paper, social determinants of health (SDH) were discussed, and how these can affect teenagers' physical and mental health was discussed. The findings mentioned above indicate how SDH and different influences, including social media, can play out, interact, and affect a young person's mental health. Qualitative responses revealed that participants had observed the negative impact of social media on their mental health but initially were unaware of the factors affecting their mental health. Therefore, it can be beneficial to educate teenagers about social determinants of health (Chung et al. 2016). Social determinants of health for children and adolescents include child maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences. The authors suggested the importance of unravelling these factors impacting adolescents' health and suggested implications for their subsequent transition to adulthood (Chung et al., 2016).

Compared to what was found in the literature, this study uncovered an interesting discovery about participants' exposure to sexual solicitation and child grooming on Discord. On this gaming form, users experienced maltreatment[social determinants of health]. According to the Fifth Estate (2024), "Discord is a popular platform with a private chatroom where experts say predators hide" (0:42). The Fifth Estate's episode on *how dark web hate groom kids for offline violence* revealed that discord emerged as "network of extremists, including racist and homophobic with antisemitic values" (4:34- 4:54). The program further indicated that "in Winnipeg, the Canadian Centre has seen a disturbing rise in cases on Discord from 140 reports in 2021 to more than 500 last year" (8:26-8:35). This program shared Federal Bureau of Investigation warning, about the groups like 746 and CVLT who target youths, primarily lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) and racial minorities and those who struggle with

mental health issues such as depression and suicidal ideation. Further, individuals on these platforms use luring tactics and create servers for topics such as eating disorders, poor self-esteem, and poor body image, which attract the attention of vulnerable users (Fifth Estate, 2024). Zenone et al. (2023) reported social media as a key determinant of health because social media targeted marketing opportunities to promote their public and political discourse. Further, mental health concerns associated with social media use, such as body image issues, are increasingly reported. Therefore, social media can directly impact users and indirectly affect societies (Zenone, 2023).

Lastly, social media was also used as a source of social support for participants in this study, which helps them connect with their family members and friends. Participants expressed that social media helped show them places around the world through virtual trips, creating a sense of connectivity with faraway parts of the world. Further, they find it exciting when their friends post about their achievements on social media. Also, when they keep themselves updated with things happening in the world, they report enjoying stuff according to their choice on social media, such as food, fashion, art, dance, music, and poetry. "I love to follow my favourite singers and their new songs and videos on social media"(Hanif 19:13). Radovic et al. (2017) indicated that positive use of social media by teenagers includes searching for entertainment, humour, fun content, and social connection. The authors also revealed that teenagers often engage in stressed posting on social media, which is a kind of online journaling (Radovic et al., 2017), helping them blow off steam.

There needs to be greater action to reduce the harmful impacts of social media on the mental health of teenagers so the advantages mentioned above of social media can be proliferated. Kross et al. (2021) suggest that more work is needed to validate the methodologies

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professionals use to study the harmful effects of social media on well-being. The authors shared concerns about self-reporting Facebook usage variables (Kross et al., 2021). There is a need to apply multiple interventions to enhance the positive and minimize the negative consequences of social media (Kross et al., 2021).

Torous et al. (2021) indicated that the most immediate steps in the field could be implemented through effective and ethical use of existing technologies in real-world settings. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that there will be a single solution to these implementation challenges; multiple options can be considered depending upon local and federal levels. A better understanding of user engagement with social media is needed at the individual level. At the provider level, improved training, more explicit expectations, and boundary setting are all necessary. At the policy level, stricter regulations for commercial settings may be required to protect the users (Torous et al., 2021)

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

This study has several strengths. The researcher has access to rich, diverse, and detailed information about the mental health implications of social media because of the previously conducted literature review using the IPA method. With the IPA approach, this study had a small sample, which permitted an in-depth interview and data analysis and gave voice to every participant. However, participants' age, gender, and cultural background reflected different perspectives and experiences. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 21. There was gender balance among the 6 participants; three were female, and three were male. Although the participants were selected from the same city, they shared different cultural backgrounds, and this diversity may have enriched the research results by providing different perspectives.

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       In terms of limitations, semi-structured interviews are prone to researcher bias. However, the interviewer aimed to reduce this by avoiding leading questions. Also, the questions were worded to facilitate participants so they could avoid providing their responses in a socially desirable way. Qualitative data analysis is subjective, and the researcher relies upon her own interpretation of the data, bringing different perspectives and interpretations. This can be subjected to interpretative bias.

Chapter 6. Implication for Practice and Recommendations

The results from this study indicate several negative impacts of social media on youth mental health. However, there are also positive effects. The current study's findings have implications for mental health professionals, parents, educators, and authorities so they can minimize the possible harms of social media. Participants' suggestions catch this theme: "Psychologists, educators, and parents" must educate children about social media's positive and negative effects (Kathy, Aihan, Steve, and Hanif).

The advantages of social media explored in this study included connection, communication, learning skills relating to participants' passions (e.g., makeup, gym, art, and music), peers' online support, enjoying funny content, and a "cushioning effect" on stress. Parents/guardians and professionals can maximize the benefits by sharing knowledge about social media accounts that benefit them. Further, adolescents must be encouraged to follow social media pages that positively impact their daily lives.

Instant gratification, non-stop scrolling, addiction, increased time spent on social media, upward and downwards comparisons, discontentment with current status, fear of missing out, peer pressure, Idolized image, negative self-esteem, exposure to graphic/sexual/inappropriate content, adaptability to unhealthy content, concerns about children using social media, unlawful practices on Discord, Snapchat, Tiktok, and Instagram, adverse effects of social media on youth mental health, including depression, anxiety, and stress were negative themes identified in this study. Minimizing these harms is a shared responsibility of policymakers, government, professionals, researchers, teachers, schools, universities, parents, and guardians.

Psychoeducation resources must be shared both by parents and professionals with youth to help them assess that the body shapes/images shared on social media are unrealistic and edited

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with various photoshopped tools. The most crucial step would be implemented through the

education system. Digital learning skills are part of the Alberta curriculum, which all students

learn. Critical digital learning skills are being taught. Maybe teachers need better professional

learning to keep current with the fast-changing social media space. There is a need for good

resources to support the teaching; similarly, education for parents is also essential since many

parents are addicted to their phones. Adu-Marfo et al. (2024) argued that teachers' knowledge

and skills and how they use technology for teaching need to be developed. The authors suggested

that developing and reinforcing an innovative teaching design of technological integration for

teachers can assist in developing new skills geared toward constructive and creative teaching that

is well suited for a new generation of students (Adu-Marfo et al., 2024). Also, youth must be

encouraged to say no to social media accounts sharing sexual content, promoting social

comparisons, and displaying risk-taking behaviours. Moreover, if youth have experiences with

such accounts, parents and teachers must have a close bond with them and listen to them non-

judgementally. So, parents can know how their children are feeling. Since much shame is

associated with unexpected encounters, it can be difficult for individuals to reach out.

Lastly, there should also be some boundaries around daily time spent on social media.

Parents should introduce clearer expectations and rules to children and teenagers, such as no

phones after 9:00 p.m. On the other hand, they should ensure that their children have solid and

secure strategies around their privacy settings. Also, parents need to consider the appropriate age

before providing cell phones to their children and should push back until their children turn 13 or

older. They should encourage youth to experience in-person sports, recreation, family gatherings,

and community activities. They should also keep their eyes open for unusual changes in their

children's behaviours. If they believe that their children have mental health challenges because of social media use, they should get in touch with professional help without any delay.

While most parents are conscious of social media's impact on their children, and they want to protect their children's privacy (Edney, 2021), they need to monitor social media's potential to exploit children. Conversations also need to be held about the negative impacts and exploitation their children can face in the digital space (Edney, 2021). Further, if adolescents encounter events on social media that influence their mental health, it is recommended that they should seek counselling services. It is also advised that school counsellors properly guide and monitor school-going adolescents so that they can take advantage of counselling services and moral development (Bolu-Steve, 2022). Perhaps this is new territory for family therapy as a modality of choice. Given the need for parents to be in the communication loop between teenagers and devices, it may be necessary to intervene at the family level.

Future Directions

This study has shared essential directions for future research. The themes that emerged from the data indicate that youth's experiences of social media and the impacts of social media use on their mental health are complex. Although some experiences have positive effects, several other experiences have negative consequences. For instance, it was identified that participants' social comparisons affected their self-esteem and present status in life because of making comparisons with influencers. Therefore, future research exploring the connections between social comparisons through social media use and youth mental health could be beneficial.

Understanding the benefits and risks of social media remains a critical research topic. Further studies, while using Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (widely used platforms by this study's participants), can measure changes in behaviour and well-being of children over

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time. The results from these studies are mandatory to provide the required evidence to guide

doctors, world health professionals/practitioners, parents, and teachers in identifying at-risk

youth. Further, providing strategies will allow them to deal with identified problems, such as the

negative impacts of social media on youth mental health. Perspectives and experiences about

connections between social media use and psychological disorders among youths may differ

from the sample of this study. Future research should also consider exploring the experiences of

adolescents with existing mental health challenges.

Finally, I recently noticed the demand for stronger laws about digital content, which

require companies to remove illegal content from their websites. Other than micro-level

strategies, there should be meso and macro-level involvements to control the harms of social

media. British Columbia, a province of Canada, took significant steps to keep children and youth

safe from these adverse effects. It restricted cell phones in schools, held social media companies

accountable, and launched services to remove images from the internet and pursue predators

(Office of the Premier, 2024). Further, in spring 2024, the federal jurisdiction will introduce

legislation to hold social media companies accountable, allowing the government to recover

costs caused by harm to children and adolescents associated with their platforms and algorithms

(Office of the Premier, 2024). Also, February 26, 2024, the government of Canada introduced

legislation to combat harmful content online, including sexual exploitation of children

(Government of Canada - Canadian Heritage, 2024). The World Wide Web is global, laws are

complex, and technology companies are vast and powerful. To protect children and youths from

social media's perceived challenges and harms, all provinces should adopt crucial measures.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA & PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

Conclusion

The study highlighted that youths had positive and negative social media experiences. However, primarily negative experiences that caused social comparisons and self-esteem issues, particularly in girls, identity crises, addiction, psychological distress because of peer pressure and fear of missing out, anxiety due to exposure to inappropriate and sexual content, and depression. The results also revealed that mental health challenges are caused by multiple factors, including the facets and social determinants of health (SDH) mentioned earlier. However, factors contributing to psychological distress may appear different for one adolescent to another. Further, the findings from this study indicate the heterogeneous emotional and mental potential for issues such as negative self-image and risk of developing addiction depending on each adolescent's circumstances and vulnerabilities, which may lead to psychological disorders among youths.

This study also aims to alert caregivers to the potential benefits and dangers of social media networking for children and young adults. Lastly, this study's findings suggest that researchers improve conceptual understanding of social media use, raise users' awareness, and offer valuable strategies to those in positions of power and responsibility, including law makers, health practitioners, parents, and website developers. Future investigations must explore social media use and vulnerability to emotional and mental health challenges on a more significant level.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisement

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA & PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

Appendix B: Interview Format

Demographic Information

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Ethnicity

Subquestions to facilitate the dialogue and preparation

- Can you tell me what social media platforms you use?
- How long have you been using social media?
- How much time do you spend on social media?
- What are your motives for using social media?
- How do you manage your safety around social media (e.g., setting up rules about who can see your posts, privacy settings, or using a fake name)?

Question 1: What types of accounts do you like to follow?

Question 2: Tell me about your experiences with engaging in social media.

Prompts

- How did you decide to engage with social media (e.g., facilitators and barriers)?
- Have there been experiences around social media use that affected your mental health?
- Can you describe a recent time when you had engaged with social media, and it affected your mental health?
- What was specific about it? What mattered about it? How did it make you feel?

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA & PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS

Appendix C. Certification of Ethical Approval

Athabasca University

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 25561

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Maryam Abro, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines\Master of Counselling

Supervisor/Project Team:
Dr. Paul Jerry (Supervisor)

Project Title:
WHAT ARE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG LATE ADOLESCENTS/ YOUNG ADULTS.

Effective Date: February 06, 2024   **Expiry Date:** February 05, 2025

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: Date: February 06, 2024

Katie MacDonald, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

Appendix D. Consent

Athabasca
University

Focused on the future of learning.

WHAT ARE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

CHALLENGES AMONG TEENS?

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Principal Researcher:
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In this research study, I invite you to share your perspectives and experiences about the connections between social media and psychological disorders among teens. The information you provide can help us develop guidelines to address the gaps in the research on the effects of social media use on the thoughts and behaviours of populations (i.e., adolescents with poor self-regulation and highly problematic media use). Further, this study evaluates the immediate effects of social media use and its impact on users' mental health.

As a participant, you are asked to participate in a conversational interview (MS Teams platform) to share your experiences as a social media user and your attitudes and perceptions about social media use and psychological disorders. The interview will take no more than 60 minutes.

You will receive a $25 Amazon gift card to thank you for participating in this study. By participating in this study, you will have a chance to tell us what recommendations about the social media use you advise based on your experiences and how you navigated the use of social media without impacting your mental health. Or any other experiences you had with social media.

Involvement in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any questions or not share information. You may withdraw from the study at any time, including the transcript review period. Withdrawal can be done by emailing the study investigators (Maryam Abro). However, if you request to withdraw after two weeks, data will be de-identified and included in the study by that time. Only the excerpts from the transcripts will be included in the data.

You will be provided transcripts to review after the interview has been completed. Comments or clarifications can be made by emailing the study investigators within two weeks. If you wish to withdraw at any part of the interview, this must be done after two weeks. Deleted data will not be used in the study. After you have approved the transcript, the data will be fully anonymized before analysis, and it will no longer be possible to remove specific participants' data.

Participation will remain confidential through all stages of the study.

Transcripts of the interviews will be transcribed using THE SOFTWARE PROGRAM MS TEAMS. Transcripts will be saved on Microsoft TEAMS ONDRIVE. All participants' personally identifiable information will be removed in transcriptions. After the transcription of the interviews is complete, the transcript files will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please get in touch with Maryam Abro using the contact information above.

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board has reviewed this project. Should you have any comments or concerns about your treatment as a participant, the research, or ethical review processes, don't hesitate to get in touch with the Research Ethics Officer by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca

CONSENT:

I have read the Letter of Information regarding this research study, and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I will keep a copy of this letter for my records.

My initials and signature below confirm that:

____   I understand the expectations and requirements of my participation in the research;
____   I understand the provisions around confidentiality and anonymity;
_____   I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time with no negative consequences;
____   I am aware that I may contact the researcher and/or research supervisor, or the Research Ethics Officer if I have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research procedures or ethical approval processes.
____   I understand that the data I provide will be anonymized and that data sets (or sets) from this project will be deposited in a password-protected folder on Maryam's Microsoft Office 365 One Drive.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

By initialing the statement(s) below,

_____   I am granting permission for the researcher to RECORD MY INTERVIEW

_____   I acknowledge that the researcher may use specific quotations of mine without identifying me

_____   I am granting permission for the researcher to use EXCERPTS OF MY INTERVIEW in the dissemination of the research

_____   I would like to receive a copy of the results of this research study by e-mail address

If you are willing to have the researcher contact you later by e-mail or telephone for a brief conversation to confirm that I have accurately understood your comments in the interview, please indicate so below. You will not be contacted more than six months after your interview.

_____   Yes, I would be willing to be contacted.

_____   NO, I DO NOT WANT TO BE CONTACTED AGAIN (BUT YOU CAN STILL USE MY INTERVIEW DATA).