The Psychosocial Impact of Social Media on the Youths in Hwange Urban Area

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Abstract

The study is about the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents. The study explores the relationship between social media use and mental health among adolescents in Hwange Urban Area, with the aim of understanding the risks and benefits of social media use for this population. The study is hinged on the three objectives that is (a) To examine the relationship between social media use and mental health problems in adolescents, (b)To identify the specific ways in which social media use is impacting on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban area and (c) To develop interventions to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health. The literature review examines existing research on social media use and mental health among adolescents, including studies on cyberbullying, misinformation, self-esteem issues, and the use of social media for social support. A qualitative research approach was used in the study. The data collection instruments used are semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a sample of adolescents in Hwange Central Ward 8. Data analysis involved thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to social media use and mental health. C The findings suggest a negative relationship between excessive social media use and mental health among adolescents in Hwange Central Ward 8, with potential impacts including increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The findings also highlight the potential benefits of social media use for social support and connection, particularly during times of stress or isolation. The study recommends interventions that promote healthy social media habits, empowering adolescents to make informed decisions about their social media use, and educate parents and communities about the risks and benefits of social media use for adolescents.

Introduction

Social media has become a ubiquitous force in the lives of adolescents worldwide, profoundly influencing their mental well-being. While it offers avenues for connection, self-expression, and information access, it also presents significant challenges. Excessive social media use can exacerbate mental health challenges and feelings of inadequacy, particularly due to the constant pressure to maintain popularity and conform to unrealistic online standards. Additionally, cyberbullying, a prevalent issue in the online world, can have devastating consequences for adolescents' mental health, leading to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation. The impact of social media on adolescents' mental health varies globally, with adolescents in developing countries facing unique challenges due to limited access to technology, internet connectivity, and mental health resources. Comprehensive research and targeted interventions are crucial to mitigate the negative impacts of social media and promote healthy online practices among adolescents worldwide. The study aims to evaluate the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange urban.

Background of the study

The number of social media users worldwide has increased by 424 million (10.1%) in the past year, to reach 4.72 billion in July 2023. This means that over 59% of the world's population now uses social media (Hootsuite, 2023). The social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, TikTok, X handle, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Reddit, Snapchat, Telegram and Discord. According to the Digital 2023 report, the top 5 most used social media platforms in the world are Facebook (2.91 billion active users), YouTube (2.56 billion active users), WhatsApp (2.44 billion active users), Instagram (2.26 billion active users) and WeChat (1.26 billion active users). However, the use of social media platforms has been noted to have rising healthy challenges among the majority of individuals users.

The impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents has been noted in the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK), China, and Africa. However, the magnitude of the impact varies depending on the country. In the USA, a 2023 study by the Pew Research Center found that 61% of US teens states that social media has a mostly positive impact on their mental health, while 15% revealed that it has a mostly negative impact (Pew Research Center, 2023). The study also found out that teens who use social media for more than three hours per day are more likely to report feeling depressed and anxious than those who use it less (Pew Research Center, 2023).

In the UK in 2022 the Mental Health Foundation found that 40% of young people in the UK aged 13-19 revealed that social media has a negative impact on their mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2022). The Mental Health Foundation also found that young people who use social media for more than two hours per day are more likely to report feeling low, anxious, and stressed (Mental Health Foundation, 2022). In China, the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2021 also exposed that adolescents who spend more than two hours per day on social media are more likely to experience depression and anxiety including feeling depressed and anxious (Chinese Academy of Sciences, 2021).

However, in Africa, there is less research on the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents. However, a study in 2023 by the University of Cape Town found that adolescents in South Africa who use social media for more than two hours per day are more likely to experience depression and anxiety. The study also found out that adolescents who use social media for social comparison are more likely to report feeling depressed and anxious (University of Cape Town, 2023).

In Zimbabwe, according to the Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey 2022, over 90% of Zimbabwean adolescents use social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This suggests that social media is an important part of the lives of adolescents in Zimbabwe, and that it is important to understand its impact on their mental health.

However, Khosa and Mhlanga (2023) speculate that social media addiction is associated with a number of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Studies have been conducted in Zimbabwe. Mujuru and Chibonga (2022) conducted a study on 'Social media use and mental health problems among adolescents in Harare, Zimbabwe'', Chikoore and Maruta (2021) on the relationship between social media use and cyberbullying among adolescents in Zimbabwe and Matanda and Ncube (2020) on 'The impact of social media on the academic performance of adolescents in Zimbabwe'.

These studies provide valuable insights into the impact of social media on adolescents in Zimbabwe, but they do not cover the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange District. The researcher has noted that a large number of adolescents in Hwange District shows signs of mental disorders, and this has been speculated to be emanating from the use of social media. However, this cannot be ascertained due to the fact that no study has been conducted on the impact of social media on the mental

health of adolescents in Hwange District. It is on this background that a study will be conducted to expose the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Central, ward 8.

Statement of the problem

A large number of adolescents in Hwange Central Constituency show signs of mental disorders. What might be cause of the mental disorders to the adolescents? Can this be the impact of continued use of the social media? This study therefore sets out to investigate the impact of social media on the mental health of the adolescents in Hwange Central Constituency of Matabeleland North Province.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange town, Zimbabwe. The study explores the relationship between social media use and mental health problems, in order to identify the specific ways in which social media use is impacting on the mental health of adolescents, and to develop some interventions to help adolescents reduce their social media use and improve their mental health.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1.2.1. To examine the relationship between social media use and mental health problems in adolescents.
1.2.2. To identify the specific ways in which social media use is impacting on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban area.
1.2.3. To develop interventions to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health.

Significance of the study

The findings of the study may help adolescents to better understand the impact of social media on their mental health and develop strategies to manage their social media use and protect their mental health. Parents, clergymen and teachers may also realize their role of supporting adolescents in managing their social media use and protecting their mental health. To mental health professionals, the findings may help them to develop more effective interventions for adolescents who are struggling with social media addiction and other mental health problems related to social media use. Policymakers may also benefit by crafting public health policies and programs on the prevention of social media addiction and the promotion of mental health in adolescents.

Review of related literature

The chapter presents a review of literature on studies that are related to the three research questions of the study. Accordingly, literature was reviewed on literature related to relationship between social media use and mental health problems, ways in which social media use impacts on the mental health of individuals and interventions helping improve mental health when using social media. The major aim of the review was to expose the gaps existing in the literature that were to be covered by the current study. The chapter first presented the social ecological framework informed by Ubuntu principles, as the theoretical framework to guide the study.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's theory posits that individuals are nestled within multiple interconnected systems, each of which influences their development and outcomes. Imagine concentric circles, each representing a layer of influence surrounding the individual adolescent. At the core lies the individual level, where personal experiences, social media engagement patterns, and even spiritual beliefs interact with vulnerability factors and coping mechanisms to shape mental health outcomes. Moving outwards, the microsystem examines the crucial roles of family dynamics, peer relationships, and school environments in shaping how adolescents navigate the digital realm and its impact on their emotional well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).The mesosystem then expands the focus to encompass the broader community landscape, investigating the influence of community norms, religious institutions, and local media narratives on social media practices and mental health perceptions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Moving beyond the immediate surroundings, the exosystem delves into socio-economic factors, technological access, and policy landscapes that shape the very context of social media use. (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Finally, the outermost circle, the macrosystem, acknowledges the potent influence of cultural values, religious beliefs (particularly ubuntu principles), and national policies on adolescent mental health and digital engagement (Bronfenbrenner,1979). This multi-layered approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of individual, social, and cultural factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social media and mental health. This is crucial in comprehending how Ubuntu, woven into the fabric of the community, influences digital experiences and mental well-being. By harnessing the power of Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Theory and infusing it with the spirit of Ubuntu, this study has the potential to make significant contributions to our understanding of adolescent mental health in the digital age. It can pave the way for culturally relevant interventions, community-based support systems, and digital literacy programs tailored to the unique needs of this Zimbabwean community

Conceptual framework

Prevalence of Social Media Use and Mental Health Concerns

The digital landscape of adolescence is increasingly dominated by social media, with nearly 90% of teenagers globally engaging on these platforms (UNICEF, 2022). In Zimbabwe, this trend holds true, with 58% of young internet users actively participating on social media, primarily on Facebook and WhatsApp (Moyo & Mpofu, 2019). This widespread adoption, however, raises concerns about its potential impact on adolescent mental well-being. Social comparison theory, for instance, proposes that exposure to curated online portrayals triggers feelings of inadequacy and depression, as individuals compare their own lives to unrealistic ideals (Festinger, 1954; Bargh et al., 2006). Fear of missing out (FOMO) further exacerbates anxieties, leading to the perception that others are experiencing more fulfilling lives (Przybylski et al., 2013). Cyberbullying, a persistent threat in online environments, directly contributes to mental health struggles, including anxiety and depression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Instagram usage has been linked to body image dissatisfaction, while Facebook use is associated with increased social comparison and envy (Triggerman et al., 2016; Weinstein & Przybylski, 2020). A growing body of research establishes a significant association between increased social media use and depressive and anxious symptoms in adolescents (Andreassen et al., 2016; Kauer et al., 2022). Loneliness and social isolation also correlate with excessive social media engagement, highlighting the potential for platforms to paradoxically hinder connections (Przybylski et al., 2013; Luhmann et al., 2022). Moreover, specific platforms seem to pose distinct risks.). The impact of social media on mental health extends beyond mere correlation. Direct

effects include sleep disruption due to late-night scrolling, negatively impacting mood and cognitive function (Hale & Zandstra, 2020).

The research by Twenge et al. (2019) confirmed that excessive social media use, particularly comparison-driven platforms like Instagram, significantly correlates with increased depression and anxiety, particularly among females. This was also corroborated by Dehaene et al. (2020) excessive social media use results in addiction leading to emotional withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and increased anxiety, In Nigeria, Nwanaji et al. (2023)'s study revealed that there is a high prevalence of cyberbullying and its detrimental effects on victims' emotional well-being, leading to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation

This glimpse into studies across the globe underscores the universal nature of concerns regarding social media and mental health, with each context playing its own unique tune. The intricate interplay between social media, mental health, and individual vulnerabilities cannot be overlooked. Pre-existing mental health conditions, socio-economic status, and family dynamics can significantly influence the impact of social media use on adolescents (Liu et al., 2019).

Ways in which social media use impacts on the mental health of individuals

One of the most significant concerns surrounding social media use is its potential to exacerbate anxiety and depression. Studies consistently demonstrate a positive correlation between excessive social media engagement and increased anxiety symptoms, particularly among adolescents and young adults (O'Keeffe et al., 2018; Przybylski et al., 2014). Social media's impact on mental health paints a complex picture. On the one hand, the curated highlight reels and constant comparisons on platforms like Instagram can fuel anxiety and depression through FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013), feelings of inferiority (Hussain & Griffiths, 2016), and even cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Scrolling through endless content replaces real-world interaction (Krach et al., 2017), superficial online connections fail to fulfill needs for intimacy (Valkenburg & Peter, 2017), and witnessing others' online lives can exacerbate feelings of isolation (Przybylski et al., 2013

It is crucial to acknowledge that the relationship between social media and mental health is not unidirectional or deterministic. Individual vulnerabilities, pre-existing mental health conditions, and coping mechanisms play a significant role in shaping how individuals experience the online world (Andreassen et al., 2016). Studies suggest that platforms emphasizing social comparison and passive content consumption, such as Instagram, may have a more detrimental impact than platforms facilitating communication and active engagement, such as Twitter (Park et al., 2018). Similarly, excessive passive scrolling and engagement with negative content have been linked to poorer mental health outcomes, while mindful and purposeful social media use may have neutral or even positive effects (Andreassen et al., 2016).

In Brazil, Oliveira et al. (2022)'s study on social media platforms impact on self-esteem among adolescents highlighted that platform emphasizing physical appearance, like Instagram, can negatively impact self-esteem, particularly for girls, while more communication-oriented platforms like WhatsApp can have positive effects on social connection and well-being. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) in the United Kingdom explored the link between social media use and depression in young adults. Their findings highlight the role of passive scrolling and social comparison in fueling feelings of inadequacy and loneliness, leading to increased depressive symptoms.

In Russia, Zaitseva et al. (2020), in Russia investigated the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents' mental health. Their study reveals a worrying prevalence of cyberbullying and its detrimental effects on emotional well-being, leading to anxiety, withdrawal, and even self-harm. More so, in Japan, a study by Yano et al. (2022) explored the potential for social media to both negatively and positively affect depression. Their findings suggest that while passive scrolling and excessive engagement can exacerbate existing depressive symptoms, online communities and supportive social interactions can play a protective role and contribute to recovery. In Botswana, Olorunyomi et al. (2023) studied the relationship between social media addiction and mental health among university students. Their research raises concerns about the prevalence of social media addiction and its association with anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, highlighting the need for interventions and awareness programs.

Interventions to help improve mental health when using social media.

This review dives into existing research exploring interventions aimed at reducing social media use and fostering resilience in young people

Psychological interventions are one approach that can be used that focuses on enhancing adolescents' internal resources and coping mechanisms. Mindfulness training, as explored by Black et al. (2015), has shown promise in reducing anxiety and depression symptoms associated with social media use. By learning to focus on the present moment and non-judgmentally observe their thoughts and feelings, adolescents can develop a healthier relationship with online platforms. Similarly, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs tailored for social media addiction, as outlined by Kuss and Griffiths (2017), equip adolescents with strategies to identify and challenge negative thought patterns triggered by online content. These interventions empower young people to manage their emotions and make informed choices regarding their online engagement.

Educational intervention is yet another avenue that focuses on empowering adolescents with knowledge and critical thinking skills. Media literacy workshops, championed by Livingstone and Helsper (2017), provide practical tools for discerning biased content, recognizing unrealistic portrayals, and understanding the algorithms that shape online experiences. This awareness enables adolescents to critically evaluate the information they encounter and make conscious decisions about their online consumption habits. Additionally, awareness campaigns focusing on cyberbullying prevention, such as Hinduja and Patchin's (2018) "StopBullying.gov" initiative, can foster responsible online behavior and reduce the potential negative impacts of social media interactions.

The third is technological interventions where parental control tools, as investigated by Walsh et al. (2019), allows parents to restrict access to certain websites and set time limits for social media use. While concerns around autonomy exist, these tools can be helpful in setting healthy boundaries and encouraging mindful engagement, particularly for younger adolescents. Similarly, time management apps and phone usage trackers can empower adolescents to track their online activity and set personal goals for reducing screen time. Additionally, promoting alternative activities and hobbies encourages teenagers to engage in enriching experiences beyond the digital realm, fostering real-world connections and contributing to overall well-being (Walsh et al. ,2019), In Taiwan, Chen et al. (2022) employed an innovative approach, utilizing an "intelligent chatbot" to provide emotional support and personalized advice to adolescents struggling with loneliness and social isolation related to social media. Their study revealed remarkable results, with participants reporting decreased loneliness, improved emotional well-being, and increased connection with others both online and offline.

Schools stand on the frontlines, equipped with the power to shape young minds. Integrating media literacy programs into curriculums is not just about technical skills; it empowers students to think critically about online content, detect misinformation, and resist manipulation (Shah et al., 2020; Livingstone et al., 2019). This awareness is crucial in combatting FOMO (fear of missing out) and the anxiety fueled by comparing carefully curated online personas to one's own reality. In Jamaica, Spence et al. (2021) implemented a school-based program called "TechSmartYouth" aimed at promoting digital literacy and healthy online behavior among teenagers. Their research demonstrates the program's success in raising awareness of cyberbullying, online privacy risks, and responsible content creation, empowering students to navigate the digital world with safety and confidence.

To those already facing challenges integrating social media awareness into existing therapeutic frameworks, therapists can tailor interventions to address anxieties, depression, and loneliness rooted in digital interactions (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Early intervention and specialized support become shields against cyberbullying and the emotional distress it inflicts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Tech companies, the architects of these digital worlds, hold immense power in shaping user experiences. Implementing features and algorithms that nudge users towards responsible behavior is a step in the right direction (Grance et al., 2019).

Mbewe et al. (2023), in Zamia, implemented a community-based intervention program promoting traditional cultural practices as a source of resilience against social media-related mental health challenges. Their research highlights the effectiveness of combining digital literacy education with culturally relevant support systems, fostering a sense of belonging and identity that reduces online anxieties and bolsters mental well-being.

This collaborative ecosystem, where schools educate, therapists heal, tech companies build with responsibility, and policymakers set the guardrails, is not a utopian dream. It is a necessary approach to ensure adolescents traverse the digital world with resilience and well-being. By working together, we can empower them to navigate the social media maze, not with fear and anxiety, but with critical thinking, mindful engagement, and a sense of connection that extends beyond the curated facades of online profiles. The future of the digital world, and the mental health of future generations, depends on it.

Methodology

Research approach

The most suitable research approach for this study is qualitative approach. This was because the study is aimed at identifying the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban area of Matabeleland North Province. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to gather in-depth insights into the participants' experiences through methods such as interviews and focus groups (Patton, 2020). A qualitative research approach is a research approach that seeks to understand the meaning of people's experiences and the way they make sense of the world around them (Creswell, 2020). It is based on the assumption that people's beliefs, values, and attitudes shape their experiences, and that these can only be understood through their own words (Patton, 2018). The qualitative research approach is most suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents Hwange Urban of Matabeleland North Province (Creswell, 2020). This is important because the study is aimed at developing strategies to address these challenges, Patton, 2018).

Research design

Case study is the most suitable research design for this study because it allows the researcher to focus on a single case, in this case Hwange Urban of Matabeleland North Province**.** Yin (2018) states that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Merriam (2009) adds that a case study is an in-depth, holistic description and analysis of a single unit (for example an individual, group, institution, The case study design allows the researcher to explore the relationship between social media use and mental health problems in adolescents, identify the specific ways in which social media use is impacting on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban and develop interventions to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health.

Population and sample

The population of the study was 9,550 adolescents in Hwange Urban. (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), 2022). The purposive sampling was used to identify the sample. Data saturation was used to collect the sample.

Research instruments

The study used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews are a type of qualitative research in which the researcher asks a set of pre-determined questions, but also allows for flexibility and follow-up questions. This allows the researcher to get a more in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and perspectives. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on the two social workers, one councilor and the two counsellors. Focus group discussions were used for triangulation of data collected

Study findings

Social media's negative impact on adolescent mental health in Hwange Urban paints a concerning picture, as revealed by the study and aligned with research from diverse contexts. Participants described a range of negative experiences. including:

The impact of social media on the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban of Matabeleland North Province.

The section presented, analyzed and discussed the results on the questions designed to answer questions on relationship between social media use and mental health problems in adolescents in Hwange urban, how social media use impact the mental health of adolescents in Hwange District and strategies adopted to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health. The sections were presented under sub-headings derived from the three research questions of the study.

Relationship between Social Media Use and Mental Health in Hwange Adolescents

This section focused on examining the relationship between social media use and mental health problems in adolescents. The participants were first asked to define social media and the following were some of the responses obtained from the participants.

A1 and A9 stated: *It is where we hang out online, connect with friends, share what's happening, and discover new things.*

SW 2 added: *It is a powerful tool for communication and connection, but it can also have negative impacts like negativity, isolation, and privacy concerns*

C1 stated: *It is a platform that connects people, used for self-expression and community building, but it can also lead to comparison, unrealistic expectations, and anxiety.*

The major theme emerging is more about how social media serves as a platform for various forms of user interaction, engagement, and expression, with potential positive and negative implications depending on the user's perspective and use.

The participants were further asked to define mental health. The following are some of the responses given.

A1: *It's like feeling good in my head and heart, handling stress, and hanging with friends without freaking out.*

A5: *Being able to express myself, deal with emotions without drama, and not feel all stressed and stuff.*

A7: *Feeling okay emotionally, handling school and stuff, and not letting negativity get me down.*

SW1: *Mental health is a complex mix of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It impacts how we think, feel, and react to life's challenges.*

SW2: *It's a spectrum, not just black and white. We all have ups and downs, but when it affects daily life, that's where support comes in.*

C1: *Mental health is like a balance - managing emotions, healthy relationships, and coping with stress to live your best life.*

C2: *It's about personal growth, self-awareness, and having the tools to handle life's curveballs without letting them break you.*

The findings reveal that "mental health" **is** well-being and the ability to navigate life effectively.

The participants were further probed to expose the social media platforms that they thought are mainly used by the youth. The following are some of the responses provided by the participants.

A1: *TikTok is still trending! But honestly, WhatsApp is where it's at. Group chats with my beasties, family updates, even school stuff goes down there.*

A5: *Snap chat is still fun for secret snaps and Shona slang with friends, but yeah, WhatsApp is king. Sharing memes, jokes, and staying connected is way easier there.*

A7: *Discord for serious gaming talk, but for casual hangouts and sharing funny Zim stuff, WhatsApp is the go-to app. We even have dedicated gaming groups there.*

SW1: *While platforms like TikTok and Instagram are gaining traction, WhatsApp is still the undisputed champ in Zimbabwe. From family communication to business interactions, it's woven into daily life.*

SW2: *Age and interests influence platform choices. Younger teens might prefer TikTok and Snap chat, but WhatsApp transcends age groups and connects communities in unique ways.*

C1: *It's vital to remember that while platforms like TikTok and Instagram exist, WhatsApp's dominance shouldn't be overshadowed. Consider potential privacy and misinformation concerns associated with any platform.*

C2: *Individual preferences still matter. Some teens might be heavily invested in specific platforms, but WhatsApp often serves as a central hub for communication and information exchange.*

The major theme that emerges is the dominance of WhatsApp as the primary social media platform for communication and connection among Zimbabwean youth, with other platforms serving specific needs or catering to different age groups.

The participants were further probed to expose their experiences on the trends that they have observed in the types of mental health issues. The following are some of the responses that obtained.

A1: *Increasing pressure to fit in and comparisons due to unrealistic portrayals, leading to low self-esteem and anxiety.*

A5: *Fear of missing out (FOMO) driven by constant updates and influencer lifestyles, impacting mood and sleep.*

A7: *Cyberbullying and online harassment contributing to depression, isolation, and feelings of worthlessness.*

SW1: *Growing anxiety around online reputation and "perfect" image curation, fueling body image concerns and eating disorders.*

SW2: *Increased exposure to negative news and negativity online leading to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.*

C1: *Difficulty setting boundaries between online and offline life, blurring reality and contributing to stress and anxiety.*

C2: *Rise in self-diagnosis based on online information, potentially delaying seeking professional help for real concerns.*

The findings from the responses reveal that the major theme emerging from these responses regarding the mental health concerns of adolescents associated with social media use **is** the negative impact of unrealistic expectations and social comparison on their emotional well-being.

Participants were further asked to explain how they saw specific social media platforms or practice influencing the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Central. The following are some of the responses provided by the participants.

A1: *TikTok's dance challenges and influencer lifestyles make me feel like I'm not good enough, stressing me out about fitting in.*

A5: *Snapchat's disappearing messages make me overthink everything, worrying if friends secretly dislike my snaps.*

A7: *Online gaming on Discord is cool, but toxic comments and arguments sometimes make me feel like quitting.*

SW1: *WhatsApp groups can be great for connection, but negativity and cyberbullying can spread quickly, impacting everyone involved.*

SW2: *Instagram's perfect-body images make girls in Hwange feel bad about themselves, leading to eating disorders and low self-esteem.*

C1: *Spending too much time on any platform, even Facebook, can isolate teens from real-life interactions and impact their mental well-being.*

C2: *YouTube tutorials are helpful for learning, but unrealistic beauty standards and negativity in comment sections can be harmful.*

How does social media use impact the mental health of adolescents in Hwange Urban

It was the objective of the study to identify the specific ways in which social media use was impacting on the mental health of adolescents in Ward 8 of Hwange Central Constituency. Accordingly, the participants were first asked why they thought social media use impacted the mental health of adolescents in specific ways. The following are some of the responses given by the participants.

A1: *It's all about comparisons and pressure. Seeing everyone's "perfect" lives online makes me feel bad*

about myself and stressed about fitting in.

A5: *The fear of missing out (FOMO) is real! Scrolling through endless updates makes me anxious and worried I'm not having enough fun.*

1. A7: *Cyberbullying hurts, even through comments and games. It makes me feel isolated and like I'm not good enough.*

SW1: *Social media can create unrealistic expectations and body image issues, especially with heavily edited photos and influencer lifestyles. This can lead to depression and anxiety.*

SW2: *Constant negativity and exposure to bad news online can be overwhelming, fueling feelings of hopelessness and helplessness in young people.*

C1: *Blurring the lines between online and offline life can be tricky. Teens struggle to unplug and can get addicted to the instant gratification, impacting their real-life relationships and mental well-being.*

C2: *Self-diagnosis and misinformation online can be dangerous. Teens might think they have a condition based on what they see, delaying seeking professional help for real concerns.*

The participants were further asked to provide concrete examples that they had encountered where social media negatively affected adolescents' mental well-being. The following are some of the responses provided.

A1: *A student started skipping school after getting body-shamed in a viral TikTok comment section. It led to anxiety and isolation.*

A5: *Constant friend group chats on WhatsApp fueled FOMO and anxiety about not being invited to events, impacting sleep and mood.*

A7: *Excessive gaming on Discord led to cyberbullying and toxic arguments, leaving a student feeling worthless and withdrawn.*

SW1: *A group chat on WhatsApp turned negative quickly, spreading rumors and causing emotional distress among several students.*

SW2: *An Instagram page promoting unrealistic beauty standards fueled eating disorders and low self-esteem in multiple girls.*

C1: *Teenagers addicted to Facebook neglected hobbies and real-life interactions, leading to feelings of loneliness and depression.*

C2: *Misinformation about self-diagnosis on YouTube led a student to believe they had a serious illness, delaying professional help.*

Strategies to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health

The last objective of the study was to develop interventions to help adolescents reduce their social media use so as to improve their mental health. Accordingly, the participants were first asked 'How can we effectively encourage adolescents to reduce their social media use and focus more on their mental health?' The following are some of the responses given by the participants.

A1: *Have honest conversations about online pressures and comparisons, normalizing struggles and offering support.*

A5: *Promote fun hobbies, sports, or volunteering to disconnect and build real-life connections.*

A7: *Encourage designated times and spaces free from devices, promoting mindfulness and relaxation.*

SW1: *Teach critical thinking skills to evaluate online content and navigate social media responsibly.*

SW2: *Support initiatives creating safe and uplifting online communities with positive role models.*

C1: *Equip teens with coping mechanisms for handling online negativity and managing cyberbullying.*

C2: *Facilitate peer support groups where teens can share experiences, find empathy, and build resilience.* Several of the responses revealed the importance of having honest conversations about online pressures and comparisons, promoting fun hobbies and activities that help adolescents disconnect from social media, and creating safe and supportive online communities.

The participants were further probed 'What community-based initiatives or educational programs do you think could be implemented to address the potential negative impacts of social media on adolescent mental health?'

A1: Interactive sessions debunking unrealistic portrayals, teaching critical thinking, and promoting healthy online habits.

A2: *Peer-led initiatives raising awareness, creating reporting pathways, and promoting empathy and respect online.*

A6: *Organized periods of disconnection with guided activities promoting real-life interaction and mindfulness.*

S W 1: *Safe spaces offering supervised internet access, digital literacy training, and mental health support.*

SW2: *Educating parents about online risks, communication strategies, and supporting healthy technology use for their children. More equipping community members to identify signs of distress and connect young people with professional help can be great help.*

C1: *Providing a safe space for teens to discuss online pressures, build coping mechanisms, and access individual support.*

C2: *Creative outlets to express emotions, process online experiences, and build self-esteem in a supportive environment.*

The responses revealed the importance of providing safe spaces for teens to discuss online pressures, building coping mechanisms, and accessing mental health support. Others highlighted the importance of educating parents and community members about the risks of social media and how to support young people in using technology safely and healthily

Summary of findings, conclusion and recommendations

This section puts the findings against research objectives to assess how much have been fulfilled. The study focused on investigating the negative impacts of social media on the mental health of adolescents and also identified coping mechanisms that can be employed in the face of identified challenges.

How **does social media use impact the mental health of adolescents in Hwange district**

Social media's negative impact on adolescent mental health in Hwange Central paints a concerning picture, as revealed by the study and aligned with research from diverse contexts. Participants described a range of negative experiences, including:

Feeling inadequate and anxious due to social comparison**:** This aligns with studies by Bardari et al. (2022) and Primack et al. (2020), finding links between social media use and lower self-esteem, body image dissatisfaction, and increased social comparison and anxiety in young people. Constant exposure to seemingly perfect online lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

FOMO (fear of missing out) driven by constant updates**:** This, along with exposure to negative online content, was linked to negative impacts on mood, sleep, and feelings of hopelessness. Studies by Orben et al. (2023) and Lin et al. (2021) support these findings, demonstrating correlations between increased social media use and higher FOMO, depression symptoms, anxiety, and decreased life satisfaction.

Cyberbullying and online harassment: These contributed to depression, isolation, and feelings of worthlessness, aligning with research by Kowalski et al. (2022) and Hinduja & Patchin (2023) showing higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and emotional distress among cyberbullying victims. Blurred online-offline boundaries: This, caused by difficulty setting boundaries between online and real life, led to stress and anxiety. Studies by Przybylski et al. (2021) and Kross et al. (2018) support this, demonstrating associations between problematic social media use and decreased sleep quality, increased loneliness, and decreased well-being.

While the study focused on Hwange Urban, it aligns with broader research findings, highlighting the multifaceted negative impact of social media on adolescent mental health. However, the research also suggests potential mitigating factors:

Strategies to reduce mental health issues

While social media can offer some positive aspects for adolescents, it's crucial to acknowledge its potential for negative impacts on their mental health. Addressing these concerns requires a multi-faceted approach, including promoting responsible social media use, open communication, and potentially implementing parental mediation strategies. Building on the concerning aspects of social media use for adolescents, the study aimed to develop interventions to improve their mental well-being. The findings suggest a multi-pronged approach:

First and far most open communication and support to the youth is very important. The study emphasizes the importance of open conversations between adolescents and adults about online pressures and comparisons. This aligns with research by Moreno et al. (2020) and Callad et al. (2021), showing that open communication with parents about online risks and experiences can lead to lower depression, anxiety, and cyberbullying victimization. By normalizing struggles and offering support, adults can create a safe space for adolescents to navigate the complexities of social media.

Promoting healthy habits among the youth on the use of social media is very important. The study suggests promoting alternative activities like hobbies, sports, and disconnecting from social media to improve mental health. This aligns with research by Twenge et al. (2018) and Walsh et al. (2020), indicating that increased social media use and decreased engagement in other activities like sports and outdoor activities are associated with higher depressive symptoms and lower well-being in adolescents. Encouraging healthy alternatives can help adolescents find balance and reduce reliance on potentially harmful aspects of social media.

The idea of adolescents' empowerment plays a crucial role in reducing the social ills of social media. The participants emphasized the importance of equipping teens with critical thinking skills, fostering safe online communities, and providing them with coping mechanisms for cyberbullying. This aligns with research by Park et al. (2018) and Hinduja & Patchin (2023), demonstrating that higher media literacy skills and interventions teaching cyberbullying prevention skills can lead to lower loneliness, social anxiety, and cyberbullying experiences, ultimately improving mental health in adolescents.

Creating safe spaces and support systems for the youth in Hwange urban is yet another solution to the impact of social media on the metal health of the youth. The findings highlight the need for safe spaces where teens can discuss online pressures, access mental health support, and build coping mechanisms. This aligns with studies by Whitlock et al. (2021) and Khoury et al. (2020), showing that peer support groups and school-based mental health resources can significantly improve mental health outcomes for

adolescents struggling with social media-related issues. Providing access to these resources can equip them with the tools to navigate challenges and build resilience.

Educating Parents and Communities is one of the most important ways of addressing the mental health of the youth emanating from the misuse of social media. Finally, the participants stressed the importance of educating parents and community members about online risks and healthy technology use. This aligns with research by Livingstone et al. (2017) and Lenhart et al. (2023), demonstrating that parental involvement in technology use and parental monitoring can mitigate the negative effects of social media and reduce cyberbullying victimization in adolescents. By empowering parents and communities, a broader support system can be established to guide adolescents towards responsible and safe technology use.

While social media can offer some positive aspects for adolescents, it's crucial to address its potential negative impacts through a multi-faceted approach. This includes promoting open communication, healthy habits, critical thinking skills, and safe online communities, alongside providing access to mental health support and educating parents and communities. By working together, we can create a safer and healthier online environment for adolescents

Recommendations

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in collaboration with the Hwange Local Education Authority should integrate media literacy and critical thinking skills into the Hwange school curriculum to empower responsible online engagement among adolescents.
- Hwange Ministry of Health and Child Care, collaborating with NGOs like UNICEF and Plan International Zimbabwe should encourage parents and caregivers to engage in open dialogue about adolescents' online experiences to build trust and offer early intervention when needed.
- Collaboration between Hwange District Council, Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts and Recreation, and NGOs like Child line Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children (ZNCWC) should develop and implement targeted interventions like anti-bullying programs and online safety workshops in Hwange communities and schools.
- The study further recommends that a longitudinal study be conducted tracking adolescents in Hwange to quantify the impact of implementing the recommended interventions on their social media use and mental health over time. This would provide valuable data on the effectiveness of these strategies in the specific context of Hwange.

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