International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

An Exploration of the Interconnection Between Social Media Usage and Mental Health in Young Adults

Aanchal Dubey[1], Anushka Tiwari[2]

[1,2]MCA Student, Babu Banarasi Das University, Lucknow

Abstract

The speedy growth of Digital media usage among young adults has instigated scholarly interest regarding its implications for psychological well-being. This scoping review combines current
Literature examining associations between digital media engagement and mental health outcomes in individuals aged 18-30. Using major scholarly databases, including Scopus, PubMed, and PsycINFO, research was examined across themes such as depression, anxiety, self-esteem, cyberbullying, and sleep disturbance. Findings indicate that both detrimental and beneficial psychological consequences are linked to the frequency, type, and quality of social media interactions. The outcome also reveals a predominant reliance on cross-sectional and self-reported data, which limits the inference of loss. In recent years, many parents, advocates and policy makers have expressed concerns regarding the potential negative impact of social media use. Some studies have indicated that social media use may be tied to negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality, loneliness and decreased empathy. Other studies have not found evidence for harm or have indicated that social media use may be beneficial for some individuals. The current correlational study examined 467 young adults regarding their time spent using social media, the importance of social media in their lives, and the tendency to engage in vaguebooking (posting unclear but alarming-sounding posts to garner attention). Outcomes considered included general mental health symptoms, suicidal ideation, loneliness, social anxiety and decreased empathy. Results indicated that social media use was not predictive of impaired mental health functioning. Overall, results from this study suggest that, except for vaguebooking, concerns regarding social media use may be misplaced.

Keywords: Social media. Mental health. Suicide. Empathy. Vaguebooking

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become deeply integrated into everyday life, especially among young adults who rely on digital platforms for communication, learning, and self-expression. As its use continues to expand, concerns about the possible impact of social media on mental well-being have increased. Researchers, health professionals, and the general public are paying closer attention to this issue to better understand how online engagement affects psychological health and digital wellness.

The interaction between social network engagement and mental health is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship; rather, it is a multifaceted and complex issue with both potential advantages and documented risks. On one hand, social media can facilitate a social bond, provide support for marginalised communities, and serve as a platform for creative expression. On the other hand, extensive research has

highlighted its negative effects, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, social isolation, and low self-regard. The constant persistent exposure to carefully curated and idealized versions of others' lives can lead to social comparison, people have stock cyberbullying, and people have a fear of missing out on social network materials, or cause severe sleep disturbance and as well as disorientation of mental health, and the addictive nature of these plateforms is all factors that contribute to a detrimental impact on psychological well-being.

We explore how young people with mental health difficulties perceive the relationship between their SNS use and their psychological and emotional well-being. We aimed to develop an initial theoretical model based on the young people's understanding of how their SNS interactions might impact their distress and well-being. A grounded-theory informed analysis was utilised to generate this model. Our primary research question was "What are young people's perceptions of how SNS use interacts with their wellbeing and distress?" Within this broad question, we were also interested in addressing the secondary question, "How do young people use SNS for self-disclosure and self-presentation in relation to their emotional experiences?"

Social media use (interacting with others through online electronic forums such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) has become an enormously popular tool for social interaction. Social media use is an important interactive tool for youth and young adults and, unlike more traditional media, users play an active role in creating and shaping the experience [1]. Moreover, social media use is an important element of the developmental process for youth and young adults as they interact with others and present their forming identities online. Because of this growing presence of social media in young people's lives, some commentators have expressed concern about potential adverse effects. Could reliance on social media for social interactions pejoratively influence real-life social contacts, leading to isolation and loneliness? Could social media use isolate people from close contact and communication with others, thereby decreasing empathy? And could the overuse of social media lead to larger problems with mental health, including suicidal ideation? The current study aims to address some of these questions in a relatively large sample of young adults.

Numerous studies identify connections between social media use and negative outcomes such as increased depression, anxiety, compulsive behaviour, loneliness, and narcissism. The burgeoning use of social media by young adults raises concerns about the possible negative effects of its use. If social media use can be linked to negative outcomes, researchers need to devote more attention to understanding factors associated with negative mental health outcomes and how to assuage these outcomes.

Social Media: An Overview

The top five most popular social networking sites are Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, and Instagram. Facebook leads the pack, boasting 71% of online adults as users (Smith, 2013). Facebook's users are not only numerous but extremely active and engaged: 63% of Facebook users visit the site at least once a day, with 40% doing so multiple times throughout the day (Smith, 2013). This continuous social media usage might stem from increased mobile usage of social networking sites. As smartphones and tablets increase in popularity, many social media users rely on their mobile apps to access their favourite sites. In the last year, 300 million Facebook users were mobile-only (DeSilver, 2014).

- Nowadays, people are using social media excessively, and because of this, they begin comparing themselves with others.
- People usually post only the best parts of their lives on social media. This attracts others, who then compare their private lives with what they see online.

- When they are unable to match up to others, they become depressed. This often damages their relationships.
- Both partners compare their lives with what they see on social media. They start expecting the same things in their own lives. When those expectations are not fulfilled, fights and arguments occur.
- As a result, their relationship gets spoiled. This has now become a serious problem. Many relationships are being negatively affected emotionally because of excessive social media use.

Objectives of the study

To explore the psychosocial and contextual determinations influencing mental-health outcomes in young adults.

To examine prevalent mental-health conditions and symptomatic patterns within this age cohort.

To identify protective psychological and environmental buffers promoting mental resilience.

To evaluate methodological tendencies and limitations in current research.

To highlight implications for policy, intervention, and future scholarly investigation.

2. Literature Review

Prevalence of mental-health conditions – Various global studies indicate that young adults face a disproportionately high burden of mental-health disorders. Key issues include mood disorders, anxiety, stress-related disorders, social-media-induced distress, and substance use. Pandemic-related isolation and disruptions further exacerbated symptoms, intensifying academic and occupational uncertainties.

Developmental and Social Role Transitions-Young adulthood involves identity exploration, career establishment, and relational restructuring. Identity inconsistency, career indecision, and unstable interpersonal networks elevate stress levels. Scholars note that emotional development during this stage remains incomplete, increasing reactionary behaviours and vulnerability to psychological imbalance.

Influence of Social-Media and Digital Consumption – Digital technology functions as both a resource and a risk. Positive effects include connectivity and support-seeking opportunities; however, excessive social-media engagement correlated with cyberbullying exposure, sleep disturbance, appearance comparison, reduced self-esteem, and anxiety. “FOMO” (Fear Of Missing Out) and online validation metrics reinforce maladaptive cognitive patterns.

Socioeconomic Pressures – Academic competition, unemployment or underemployment, rising cost of living, and financial responsibilities produce significant psychological strain. Economic uncertainty often results in persistent worry, burnout, and emotional fatigue.

Family Dynamics and Cultural Expectation- In collectivist cultures, such as many Asian and African societies-parental expectations regarding career, marriage, and social status shape mental-health experiences. Intergenerational conflict and lack of autonomy can exacerbate anxiety and depressive tendencies.

Protective Psychological Factors- Resilience, emotional intelligence, adaptive coping mechanisms, and problem-solving skills significantly buffer against psychological decline. Participation in physical activity, mindfulness practices, and effective time-management strategies further enhances well-being.

Social Support and Institutional Interventions- Peer engagement, supportive family relationships, mentorship programs and accessible counselling services correlate with reduced distress. Universities and workplaces increasingly adopt mental-wellness policies, although implementation remains uneven.

Search strategy

Scholarly databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and Scopus, were queried using Ke-

ywords such as “young adults,” “mental health,” “psychological well-being,” “stress,” “anxiety,” and “depression.” Filters included publication years from the last decade, English language, and peer-reviewed articles. This study gathers materials published on social media, mental health, and youth interconnection using the online Scopus database. Due to its reputation as the largest citation and abstract database in technology, social science, business, and management, the Scopus online database was chosen for this study. Refinement of Search Result. After obtaining the initial results, the researchers screened all articles based on the exclusion criteria determined in this research. There are two (2) exclusion criteria used to filter the search results: (i) sexual harassment, (ii) artificial intelligence, (iii) social anxiety, and (iv) transgender adolescents.

3. FINDINGS

Analysis of the data identified two key mechanisms influencing adolescents’ wellbeing: “threats and judgement” and “connection and support”, resulting from having “continuous access to a vast social network”. Several factors contributed to how these mechanisms influenced well-being, including responses to threat and the processes and outcomes of “safe sharing”. Ultimately, adolescents’ interactions with SNS were conceived as a gamble of balancing the positives and negatives of their experiences in a culture in which SNS use felt unavoidable. Figure 1 illustrates these findings.

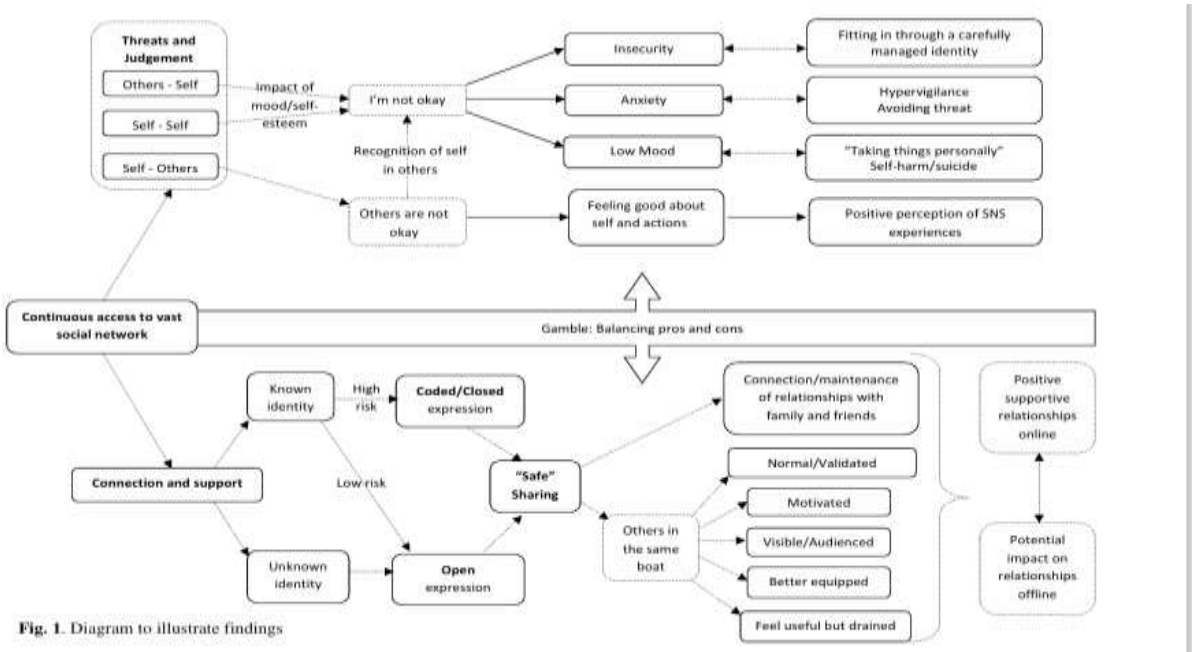


Fig. 1. Diagram to illustrate findings

3.1. Continuous access to a vast social network:

All of the young people described having constant access to the SNS that they used, many describing using the sites “continuously”. There was an inherent awareness of being part of a vast social network in which they were visible to friends, family and unknown others. This presented the challenge of being judged and receiving threats, as well as the opportunity for connection and support.

3.2. Threats and judgment:

Underpinning many of the participants’ experiences was judgment and the experience of SNS as a threatening place. Judgement was directed towards young people from others (others-self), from the young person towards themselves (self-self) and from the young people towards others (self-others). Across all experiences was the acknowledgement that existing mood, self-esteem and/or thinking styles influenced

interpretation of threats on SNS, as Lizzie explained, "it can be really bad for people who have depression or mental illnesses because they can… just the way they work, makes them think differently from other people whereas someone might not bat an eyelid at something somebody's said."

3.2.1. Threats and judgment: Others – self. For most of the young people, judgment was received from those with whom they had offline contact, including peers at school. Nina (aged 13) described a graphic and upsetting threat from a peer who had become jealous after she expressed interest in another boy, "he said that he wants to like hang me and he wants to pour acid down my throat". Nina's experience had led to frequent panic attacks, her reason for accessing CAMHS. For some, judgment was specifically related to their mental health. Ben (aged 16) described, "I've had abuse, 'you're an Emo, you're a freak, you're no good, you should just end your life instead of just saying that you want to'". Similarly, Jane (aged 15) became SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ADOLESCENTS' WELLBEING 16 fearful of others' response to her CAMHS attendance after witnessing a friend receiving judgement, "there was a boy in my school who posted 'I've got a CAMHS appointment tomorrow, I'm scared' and then people commented on his status saying, like, 'you're a nutcase'".

3.2.2. Threats and judgment: Self – self Young people viewed others' pictures and personal information for prolonged periods of time. This encouraged an exaggerated version of offline social comparison processes; SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ADOLESCENTS' WELLBEING 17 paying close attention to others' appearance and activities without breaking the usual face-to-face social rules. Young people typically felt insecure when they noticed what they lacked in comparison to others, as Natalie (aged 15) described, "everyone's got be better than everyone and if you're not better than you're nothing". As an influential factor in most of their SNS interactions, young people identified that their mood influenced the nature of their comparison, as Ruby (aged 17) explained, "if you're feeling like particularly like self conscious or something that day, you're more likely to pick up on other people looking better or skinnier or something which makes you feel worse about yourself". Despite recognising the impact of such comparisons on their mood and well-being, young people found this process difficult to resist.

3.2.3. Threats and judgement: Self – others Young people compared their own and others' use of SNS with considerable judgement. They identified people who expressed feelings of low or suicidal, but who they felt were not genuine. Kim (aged 17) described her frustration towards such "attention seekers": ...it's like 'what are you doing?'…Like, you're not going to do anything to yourself cause you're writing about it all over Twitter, you're wanting someone to stop you, or you're wanting someone to be like 'oh don't, babe', that's attention seeking, not being suicidal and self-harming, and that's what really frustrates me. I hate it. Nevertheless, Kim went on to describe how when she feels low the number of tweets that she posts draws attention from friends at college, "[I'll post] like 24 plus tweets and it's like they're all like really depressing so then people read your thing and there's like, I've had people come up to me in college like 'was you having a bad day the other day?'". Young people described others' posts as disgusting, unnecessary or deemed others as "pathetic" for needing reassurance through receiving "likes", but equally valued likes SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ADOLESCENTS' WELLBEING 18 themselves. Sally (aged 16) spoke of how others were dull and stupid for using SNS and that she was "not bothered" about others' lives, yet also spoke of her "compulsive" need to stay up to date with everyone's statuses.

3.3. I'm not okay.Social comparison processes and direct judgment and threats from others typically led to young people's belief they were "not okay", associated with insecurity, anxiety, and low mood. Young people implemented a range of strategies to cope with the emotional impact of this experience.

3.3.1. Insecurity↔ Fitting in through a carefully managed identity. Insecurity-motivated young people were wary and thoughtful about how they portrayed themselves online. They posted more frequently and openly when they felt happy or content, yet were more cryptic about their difficult experiences or distressing emotions. Young people's posting behaviour changed in response to validation or rejection from others. They analysed others' responses to their posts and considered how they might change to receive more "likes" in the future: Say, for example, I upload two selfies, one gets 50 likes, the other one gets 5…what's wrong with me in that picture? Should I never have my hair like that? Should I never do my makeup like that ever again?

4. METHOD

Mixed-methods research: These studies integrate large-scale surveys—often using instruments such as the GAD-2 and PHQ-2—with detailed interviews and focus groups to obtain both numerical data and rich narrative insights.

Quantitative data: Surveys are used to gather measurable information on how common mental health issues are and to detect patterns across various demographic groups.

Qualitative data: Interviews and focus groups provide a deeper understanding by capturing young adults' personal stories, viewpoints, and emotional experiences related to their mental health.

Literature reviews: Researchers systematically examine existing research on young adult mental health to identify major themes, recurring topics, and areas where further investigation is needed.

Search strings: Keywords such as "(mental health OR depression OR stress) AND (young adult OR young people)" help researchers locate relevant academic studies.

Machine learning and statistical techniques: Advanced computational approaches can process large datasets to uncover key factors influencing mental health.

Feature selection: This method identifies the most impactful variables from a broad set of potential predictors.

Logistic regression: This statistical approach assesses how selected variables contribute to mental health outcomes.

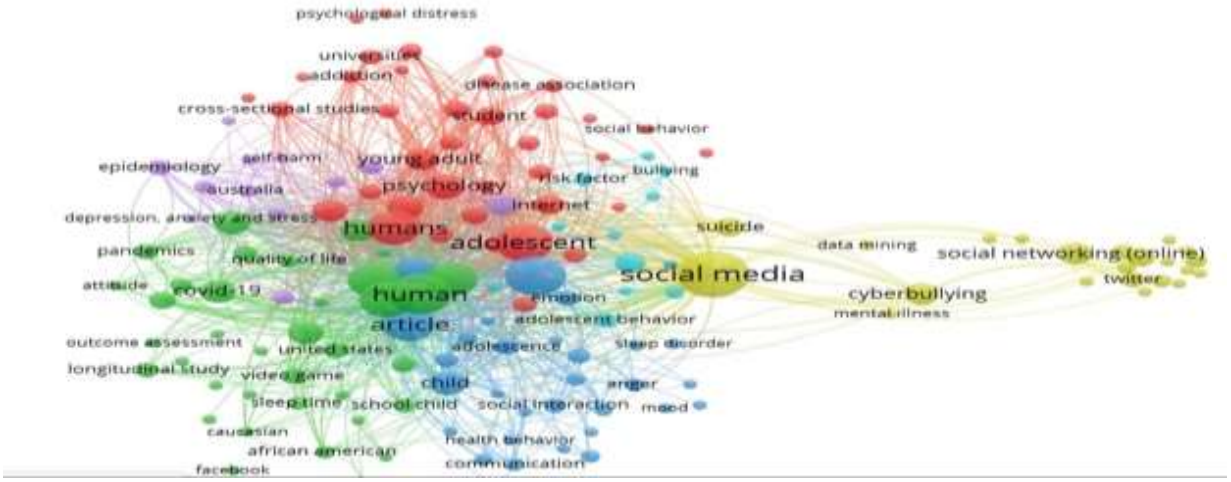
5. CONCLUSION

This review of the research on the connection between social media use and degraded mental health demonstrates the importance of the topic: the potential harmful effects surrounding social media use have profound consequences for young adults. As previously noted, the mental health problems developed in young adulthood can plague a person throughout their lifespan. The importance of continued research and exploration on this topic cannot be overstated.

The theories reviewed in the previous section offer explanatory value in the relationship between social media and mental health. By focusing on several individual- and social-level theories, this thesis was able to illuminate how complex this relationship is. The theories discussed seem to offer insight into the complex connections between social media use and mental health, implying that several of the social and individual theories discussed may play a role in creating the connection between young adult mental health and social media use.

It is important to note that this thesis could not cover every theory that could explain how social media use connects to mental health. For example, there is a growing body of research on the topic of cyberbullying and the effects this activity has on the self-image of young people. Given that young adults

tend to be highly influenced by peers, this online bullying could affect mental health. Similarly, the body image of young people, particularly girls and young women, seems to be affected by the consumption of online media. The shortcoming of this thesis, and the current research at large, lies in the inability to examine all factors that may contribute to the relationship between social media use and mental health simultaneously. Social media research is a relatively new topic; most of the existing literature is exploratory. Given the complex nature of this relationship, it is challenging to address the connection thoroughly while controlling for confounding variables. It is important to note that causality has not been proven and that many of the topics and theories presented in this thesis are merely potential explanations for an observed connection.



Recommendations

Pragmatic recommendations from this thesis are given to mental health practitioners, young adults, and parents. The exploration of theories presented in this thesis suggests that practitioners need to understand social media use as a potential cause or outcome of mental health problems. It is important that mental health practitioners and health care providers are aware of the potential threats that social media use can pose to young adults so that they can provide young adults with proper recommendations and guidance. Young adults should be informed of the risks they face, both in general mental health maintenance and in social media use. Only through understanding that social media poses certain risks to their mental well-being can they self-monitor their behaviour on social media. It is recommended that young adults have an awareness of what online activities make them feel anxious or sad, or when those online activities might be getting in the way of other activities that improve their health. Parents should also be aware of the threats to mental health that their children face. By understanding how social media can affect the mental health of their children, parents can talk to their children about healthy social media habits and balancing their time on social media and help protect their children from experiencing mental health issues later in life. The challenge for future research is to continue to explore the connection between mental health and social media use. More research is needed to understand exactly why the connection exists so that people can guard against it. Longitudinal research is lacking from the current research; more is needed to explore this connection over time and to understand the long-term effects of social media use. However, research on this topic is difficult to conduct due to numerous potential confounds. Ideally, future research should provide more recommendations for mental health practitioners, young adults, and parents.

REFERENCES

1. AC Nielsen Company. (2000) Nielsen report on television. New York: A.C. Nielsen Company.
2. Ainsworth, B., Haskell, W., Whitt, M., Irwin, M., Schwartz, A., Strath, S., O'Brien, W., Bassett, D., Schmitz, K., Emplaincourt, P., Jacobs, D., & Leon, A. (2000). Compendium of physical activities: an update of activity codes and MET intensities. Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise 32, S498–S516.
3. American Psychiatric Association (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fourth edition, text revision (DSM-IV-TR). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
4. Antonovsky, A. (1987). Unravelling the mystery of health. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
5. Anxiety UK (2012, July 9). Anxiety UK study finds technology can increase anxiety. Retrieved from http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/2012/07/for-some-with-anxiety-technology- can increase-anxiety/ Ariely, D. (2009). Predictably irrational (1st ed.). HarperCollins Publishers.
6. Błachnio, A., Przepiorka, A., & Pantic, I. (2016). Association between Facebook addiction, self-esteem and life satisfaction: A cross-sectional study. Computers in Human Behavior, 55, 701-705.
7. Bretherton, I., Munholland, K., Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. (1999). Internal working models in attachment relationships: A construct revisited. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications (pp. 89–111).
8. London: The Guilford Press.
9. Bryce, J., & Fraser, J. (2014). The role of disclosure of personal information in the evaluation of risk and trust in young peoples' online interactions. Computers in Human Behavior, 30, 299–306.
10. Cash, S. J., Thelwall, M., Peck, S. N., Ferrell, J. Z., & Bridge, J. A. (2013). Adolescent suicide statements on MySpace. Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking, 16(3), 166–174.
11. Cassidy, W., Faucher, C., & Jackson, M. (2013). Cyberbullying among youth: A comprehensive review of current international research and its implications and application to policy and practice. School Psychology International, 34(6), 575–612.
12. Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory (1st Edn.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
13. Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. (2008). Online communication and adolescent relationships. The Future of Children, 18(1), 119–146.
14. Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. CyberPsychology and Behavior, 7 (3), 321 326.
15. Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2011). Online communication among adolescents: An integrated model of its attraction, opportunities, and risks. Journal of Adolescent Health, 48(2), 121–127.
16. Gupta, C., Jogdand, D. S., & Kumar, M. (2022). Reviewing the Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health Adolescents and https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.30143.
17. Young Adults. Cureus, 14(10), e30143. Elgar, F. J., Napoletano, A., Saul, G., Dirks, M. A., Craig, W., Poteat, V. P., Holt, M., & Koenig, B. W. (2014). Cyberbullying victimization and mental health in adolescents and the moderating role of family dinners. JAMA Pediatrics, 168(11), 1015–1022. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.1223
18. Emily, A. V., Risa, G.W., & Navid, M. (2022). Teens, social media, and technology 2022. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/
19. HelpGuide.org. (2023, August 4). Social media and mental https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm

20. Janna, A., & Lee, R. (2018). Stories from experts about the impact of digital life. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-positives-of-digital-life/
21. Jan, M., Soomro, S. A., & Ahmad, N. (2017). Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 13(23), 329. https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n23p329