Young adult's reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence: A case study in Pretoria, Gauteng

by

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Charmanay Schoeman 06/11/2024

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this mini dissertation, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval (13031768 HUM017/1020).

The author declares that she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.

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ABSTRACT

Young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence: A case study in Pretoria, Gauteng.

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In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of adolescents' lives, shaping their behaviours, identities, and interactions. Social media offers them a platform to connect, share experiences, and access valuable resources. Many adolescents use these platforms to maintain friendships, engage with diverse perspectives, and explore their identities, which are critical during this important developmental phase. However, the impact is not only positive. Excessive screen time and exposure to unrealistic portrayals of life can harm self-esteem, leading to anxiety, depression, or body image concerns. Other harms such as cyberbullying, the use of pornography and online sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), are significant challenges, with South African adolescents particularly vulnerable due to limited digital literacy and the anonymity of online interactions.

The goal of the study was to explore the experiences of social media use during adolescence through the reflections of a sample of young adults living in Pretoria, Gauteng. The study was qualitative in nature and formed part of a group research project. An interpretivist approach was adopted, seeking to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon. As the research findings could be of value for social work practice, the study was applied research. Following an instrumental case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants who were recruited in Pretoria, South Africa, by means of purposive and snowball sampling. The ecological systems theory formed the theoretical framework and provided insight into how adolescents' social media engagement is influenced by their social contexts.

While social media use during adolescence is associated with both positive and negative effects, the research findings provide evidence of mostly negative effects of

social media use on the participants during adolescence, including on their emotional, social, relational, physical and academic well-being and on their self-perception. Characteristic of risks associated with social media use, such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and the influence of 'likes' on social media, were also highlighted.

The study highlights the necessity for comprehensive strategies involving parents, educators, peers, professionals, and practitioners to encourage and educate safer online practices amongst adolescents. This includes teaching critical thinking, promoting open discussions about online experiences, and fostering resilience to navigate both the benefits and risks of the digital world. Recommendations are proposed for legislative frameworks, educational initiatives, and digital literacy programmes aimed at effectively addressing the challenges posed by social media use among adolescents. Further studies on the topic, for example on social media use by different age groups, and the role of parents and schools in children's social media use, can contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the impact of digital media, advocating for a comprehensive approach to safeguard children and adolescents from the potential harms of social media.

KEY CONCEPTS:

- Social media
- Internet
- Social network sites
- Adolescence
- Young adult

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The adolescent phase, spanning the ages 10 to 18 years, represents a complex journey transitioning from childhood to adulthood, and is considered one of the most interesting periods in human development (Steinberg, Albert, Banich, Cauffman, Graham & Woolard, 2008:1765; Arnett, 2016:461). This period is characterised by intense physical, cognitive, emotional, mental, and social changes that lay the groundwork for an individual's adult future (Azzopardi, Patton, Sawyer & Wickremarathne, 2018:1). Noteworthy, is that social media has become an integral part of the lives of today's adolescents and young adults, with a significant majority unable to envision a world without it (Barth, 2015:201). Recent reports indicate that between 93% and 97% of young people between the ages of 13 to 17 years actively use at least one social media platform (Vannucci, Simpson, Gagnon & Ohannessian, 2020:259) with 58% of South African adolescents reporting that they went online daily (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:25).

By the end of 2019, just before the onset of the COVID pandemic, approximately 51% of the global population, accounting for 4 billion people, had embraced Internet usage (World Bank, 2021). Over the years, there has been a notable increase in Internet usage among individuals in South Africa, with the percentage of the population accessing the internet rising from 47% to 72% from 2013 to 2021 (World Bank, 2021). This surge in internet usage has also led to an increased risk of online harm, particularly in the realm of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA). Online Sexual Abuse (OSA) has distinct characteristics, including its accessibility, global reach, and the permanence that characterises the Internet, which can lead to long-lasting feelings of anxiety, fear, and embarrassment for the child victim (Schmidt, Anedda, Burchartz, Eichsteller, Kolb, Nigg, Niessner, Oriwol, Worth & Woll, 2020:1).

Furthermore, social media has exerted a noteworthy influence on adolescent development, offering both advantages and disadvantages that can impact their development. While these platforms provide positive opportunities for education, learning new skills, keeping up to date with daily happenings and creating

opportunities for self-expression, communication, socialisation and identity formation among adolescents (Bányai, Zsila, Király, Maraz, Elekes, Griffiths, Andreassen & Demetrovics, 2017:2; Hausmann, Touloumtzis, White, Colbert & Gooding, 2017:715). They also pose potential disadvantages affecting physical, mental, social, educational and emotional health, such as sleep deprivation and body dissatisfaction. In this respect, the National Sleep Foundation reports that 97% of adolescents in United States reported using at least one technology device in their bedroom before their bedtime, a habit associated with poor quality sleep and increased levels of sleep deprivation among adolescents (Gradisar, Wolfson, Harvey, Hale, Rosenberg & Czeisler, 2013:1291). Additionally, peer pressure on social media can influence adolescents to post certain content online to impress others, failing to keep to a real life identity (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:3). Studies suggest that inappropriate online content exposure or sharing, for example cyberbullying, self-harm content and exposure to sexual images or engaging in pornography may have lasting effects such as guilt, shame, and misconceptions of sexual and relationship norms (Rademeyer, 2023:2; Stoilova, Livingstone & Khazbak, 2021:36). Online grooming often lead to experiences of manipulation and coercion by the victims thereof, which result in feelings of shame and self-blame (Schmidt et al., 2020:1; Stoilova et al., 2021:45).

The purpose of this study was to explore the reflections of young adults regarding their experiences of social media use during adolescence, aiming to understand the impact of social media on a sample of adolescents in South Africa. This study was conducted as part of a group research project, with multiple researchers conducting individual studies on the same topic.

The following key concepts apply to this study:

- **Social media**

Social media is a concept that proves challenging to define comprehensively due to the dynamic nature of the technological landscape (Carr & Hayes, 2015:47). The ever-evolving nature of digital platforms and their diverse applications across multiple disciplines contribute to the complexity of pinpointing a singular definition for social media. Attempting to impose a definitive description on social media poses obstacles when it comes to formulating theories concerning its impact and usage (Carr & Hayes, 2015:46; 47). Instead, acknowledging the fluidity and adaptability of social media as it

continues to evolve allows for a more subtle understanding of its complex role in society. In this study, the definition of social media stated by Carr and Hayes (2015:49) is adopted, namely "Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others."

- **Internet**

The Internet is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organisational computer facilities around the world." As a wireless connection, the Internet enables people to search for information, to communicate, play games and download information (Mesch & Talmud, 2010:46).

- **Social Networking Sites (SNS)**

Social network sites (SNS) are defined as web-based virtual communities that allow people to construct individual and partially public online profiles (Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand & Chamarro, 2017:1). SNS provides a platform that enables people to share information and interests about themselves with others such as friends, family, and the wider community (Safko & Brake, 2009:26).

- **Adolescence**

Adolescence is defined as the developmental stage characterised by transitioning from childhood to adulthood, typically spanning the ages of 11 to 18 years (Berk, 2015:6). This phase represents a complex journey marked by substantial physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that lay the foundation for the person's future (Arnett, Chapin & Brownlow, 2018:461). Bridging the gap between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is viewed as a critical period in human development (Louw & Louw, 2014a:303).

- **Young adult**

Young adulthood, typically spanning from ages 18 to 35, represents a distinctive life stage wherein individuals transition from dependency on their families and attendance at school to establishing independence and self-sufficiency (Klassen, Douglass, Brennan, Truby & Lim, 2018:2). During this phase, individuals accomplish significant

developmental tasks aimed at self-exploration, fostering a personal identity, and establishing belief systems, all while striving for independence and autonomy (Higley, 2019:3).

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1995) formed the theoretical framework for this study. The theory describes the influence of a range of complex, interactive environmental systems in which the child develops. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem; each significantly influences the child's development (Berk, 2013:26; Louw, Louw & Kail, 2014:29). In addition, the chronosystem represents changes that occur over time (Berk, 2013:29).

The microsystem represents the closest layer to the child, comprising structures with which the child has direct interaction. It includes the child's activities and interactions within his or her immediate environment, such as the immediate family, school, childcare centre, and the immediate neighbourhood (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29). Relationships within the microsystem is reciprocal nature, for example the adults will influence the child's behaviour, while the child, with his or her inherent personality and physical characteristics and abilities, will in turn influence the behaviour of parents and other adults (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29).

The mesosystem denotes the interrelation among the elements within the child's microsystem, encompassing interactions between immediate contexts such as the child's school, home, and neighbourhood (Berk, 2013:27-28). The ecological systems theory posits that events occurring in one microsystem are likely to impact other microsystems (Louw et al., 2014:29). Consequently, a child's academic achievement may be influenced by the strength of the connection between parents and the child's school.

The exosystem pertains to the broader social context. The child does not directly engage in this context; however, this wider environment still influences the developing child (Louw et al., 2014:29). This system encompasses formal environments like the parents' workplace, healthcare and social services, and religious institutions, as well as informal settings such as the parents' social circles, including their extended family and friends (Berk, 2013:28). While the exosystem can offer support to parents in child-

rearing, adverse conditions like poverty and unemployment can result in detrimental outcomes for both children and their family (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29).

The macrosystem - the outermost layer of the child's environment - encompasses the values, cultures, customs, and laws of society. The micro-, meso-, and exosystems are nested within the macrosystem and, as a result, the macrosystem exerts a significant albeit indirect influence on the child's life (Berk, 2013:28; Louw et al., 2014:29).

The chronosystem pertains to changes and life events occurring over time. These changes can arise from external life events such as changes in the child's life or from within the child, for example the growth and development of the child (Berk, 2013:29). As children mature, they increasingly shape many of their own experiences and environments, depending on their individual characteristics or the opportunities available in their surroundings.

With focus on social media, the emergence of information and communication technology (ICT) is regarded by Oberst et al. (2017:51) as relevant to the chronosystem as smartphones, computers, and tablets increasingly become integral to modern life. These technologies are also regarded as part of the microsystem. Johnson and Puplampu (2008:5) note that these technologies have expanded beyond the previous role of television within the child's microsystem, and regard them as an ecological techno-subsystem that forms a dimension of the microsystem. Consequently, the techno-system directly influences the child's interactions within the microsystem.

By including the ecological systems theory, the researcher could consider how social media affects the various systems within which adolescents function in their daily lives. The research findings could provide information on the influence of social media use on aspects such as the adolescent's immediate environment, academic and social performance, as well as their values and norms. Therefore, it is important for social workers to recognise the influence of social media due to social media being part of children's immediate and wider environment, having a significant impact on their development and functioning.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE

The integration of social media into adolescents' microsystem has led to social media use becoming one of the primary activities in which they engage on a regular basis (Coyne, Radesky, Collier, Gentile, Linder, Nathanson, Rasmussen, Reich & Rogers, 2017:9; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:800). Compared to previous generations, young persons in recent times – often referred to as Generation Y – exhibit a heightened engagement with social media and networking platforms and cannot envision a world without social media (Barth, 2015:201; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010:225). Smartphones and their accompanying social media platforms consequently play a meaningful role in the lives of and identity formation during adolescence (Goggin & Crawford, 2011:256; Warburton, 2012:11). While it is acknowledged that social media offers advantages such as education, self-expression, social support and access to interesting information or daily happenings, it also presents disadvantages for adolescents. As an example, several studies point to a link between adolescents' social media use and their mental well-being (Kelly, Zilanawala, Booker & Sacker, 2018:59). Constant Internet connectivity can induce stress and dependency, leading to anxiety when the adolescent cannot access SNS (Hawk, van den Eijnden, van Lissa & ter Bogt, 2019:66). Moreover, excessive Internet usage can result in social isolation and heightened loneliness and social anxiety (Glover & Fritsch, 2018:174). It has been found that adolescents themselves hold diverse perspectives on how social media influences their lives (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5).

Professionals working with adolescents often lack a comprehensive understanding of social media's impact on their clients, as they may not have experienced it during their adolescence (Barth, 2015:201). This knowledge gap can impede professionals' ability to comprehend the effects of social media use on adolescents and might affect the services they provide to adolescents who experience the adverse effects of social media use.

As part of a group research project, this study was thus intended to gain a better understanding of the influence of social media on adolescents within a South African context. The research question guiding this study was as follows: *What are young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media during adolescence?*

1.4 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

1.4.1. Research goal

The goal of the study was to explore and describe young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence in a case study in Pretoria, Gauteng.

1.4.2. Research objectives

The research study was guided by the following objectives:

- To theoretically conceptualise social media and to contextualise it within the South African context.
- To explore and describe participants' use of social media during their adolescent years.
- To explore and describe the participants' perceptions of positive and negative influences of social media use on them during adolescence.
- To obtain suggestions from the participants on promoting optimal use of social media by adolescents.
- To obtain the participants' suggestions for curbing the harmful effects of social media on adolescents.

1.5 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods employed in this study were aimed at comprehensively exploring the influence of social media use on adolescents, as reflected by the experiences of a sample of young adults in a South African context. To achieve this goal, an interpretivist research design and qualitative research approach were implemented (Fouché & Delport, 2011:66; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). Applied research was relevant (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:94-95) as the research findings could be used by social workers in delivering services to adolescents who experience adverse effects of social media use. An instrumental case study design was implemented with the intent to gain knowledge and understanding of social media use on adolescents (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:94-95; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82).

The study population consisted of young adults aged 19 to 25 in Pretoria, Gauteng, who had previous experience using various social media platforms during their adolescent years (Strydom, 2011a:223; Wagner, Kawulich & Garner, 2012:272). This

age group was chosen for their potential to offer valuable insights into their social media usage during adolescence. Sampling involved purposive as well as snowball sampling techniques to ensure a representative and diverse sample. Purposive sampling allowed for the selection of participants based on specific criteria, including age range (18-25 years), prior social media usage during adolescence, and language proficiency in either Afrikaans or English, while snowball sampling expanded the participant pool beyond the researcher's initial contacts and social circles (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198; Strydom & Delport, 2011:393).

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured one-to-one interviews, offering flexibility while maintaining focus on the research topic (Strydom & Delport, 2011:393). This method enabled in-depth exploration of the participants' perceptions of and experiences with social media use during adolescence. With the consent of the participants, audio recordings were made of the interviews, supplemented by detailed field notes to provide additional context and insights (Greeff, 2011:351-352; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:94).

The qualitative data gathered from the interviews were analysed by means of thematic data analysis. This method, aligned with the interpretivist research paradigm, involved several iterative phases, including familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and reviewing themes for relevance and accuracy (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015:223-224).

Data quality was ensured through various strategies focusing on credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, and included reflective practice, peer debriefing, and detailed research documentation to enhance credibility and dependability. Additionally, comprehensive descriptions of key concepts and research methods were provided to address transferability concerns, considering the potential application of findings in other contexts. Confirmability was supported by maintaining objectivity through peer debriefing and verbatim quotes from participants (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123; Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:419).

A pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the interview schedule and refine it based on feedback from a single participant meeting the study's inclusion criteria. Insights from the pilot study confirmed the applicability of the interview schedule and the clarity and relevance of questions. Data obtained during the pilot

study were included in the research findings (Fouché & Delport, 2011:75; Strydom, 2011b:237). The study was conducted with consideration of research ethical considerations (Strydom, 2011c:115). The research methodology and ethical considerations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations stemmed from the dynamic nature of social media platforms and the rapid pace of digital evolution. Keeping abreast of current media trends proved challenging, as the landscape of social media continually evolves. Furthermore, reflective interviews might result in not all information being an accurate representation due to the time lapse involved. Consequently, the study may not fully capture the nuances of contemporary social media experiences among young adults as it evolved since their adolescent years.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this study had a relatively small sample size of only 10 participants. Although efforts were made to include a diverse range of individuals within the specified age group, the limited sample size reduces the generalisability of the findings to the broader population. A larger sample size would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the complexities surrounding young adults' experiences with social media during adolescence, providing greater depth and breadth to the conclusions drawn from the study. Therefore, future research endeavours should aim to recruit a larger and more representative sample of participants to enhance the reliability and generalisability of findings. By doing so, researchers can better understand the nuances of social media use among young adults and its impact on various aspects of their lives.

The study was implemented in a specific geographical area. The research findings may not be relevant to adolescents who live in other geographical contexts, for example, those living in rural areas.

1.7 CONTENTS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

The research report consists of the following chapters:

Chapter 1: General introduction and orientation to the study

In this initial chapter, the report opens with a broad introduction to the research topic. It furthermore outlines the theoretical framework of the study and elucidates the

study's rationale and problem statement. Following this, the chapter presents the overarching goal and specific objectives of the study and provides an overview of the research methodology that was utilised. Lastly, the limitations inherent in the study was highlighted.

Chapter 2: Social media use during adolescence

Chapter 2 contains an overview of the research topic based on existing literature pertaining to the subject of social media use during adolescence. It encompasses various facets, including the prevalence of social media use among adolescents, both positive and negative effects of social media use during this critical period, addressing problematic usage, exploring the benefits of social media engagement, and examining the role played by parents in this context. Furthermore, this chapter includes information on the developmental phase of adolescence and touches on prevention and intervention strategies described in the literature.

Chapter 3: Research methodology and empirical findings

Chapter 3 forms a core part of the report, outlining the research methodology employed in the study in detail. It also describes the ethical principles that guided the research process. This chapter primarily focuses on presenting the empirical findings, incorporating direct quotes from participants to illustrate key themes. Additionally, the researcher connects these findings with relevant literature and the theoretical framework, offering a comprehensive perspective on the topic under investigation.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

The concluding chapter synthesises the key aspects of the research. It offers a recap of the study's primary goal and objectives and proceeds to the key findings that have emerged from the research, drawing from both the empirical data and the insights gained from the literature review. The key findings form the basis for making conclusions and providing recommendations stemming from the study's outcomes. These recommendations are designed to inform social workers in terms of potential future actions, policies, or interventions related to social media use during adolescence.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING ADOLESCENCE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, technology has seamlessly worked itself into our daily lives, fundamentally altering how we navigate the world around us (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney & Waters, 2014:18). Devices such as smartphones, personal computers (PCs), and tablets have become ubiquitous tools, integral to our communication, education, work, and leisure activities. This widespread adoption of technology has not only revolutionised the way we interact with each other but has also reshaped our behaviours and lifestyles, ushering in both positive and negative changes (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:9; Rainie & Zickuhr, 2015:12). Given the increasing prevalence of social media use among adolescents and its potential impact on their well-being, there is a growing need for deeper understanding and research in this area. This study, which explored young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence, was aimed at gaining insights into the advantages and disadvantages associated with its use among this age demographic group.

This chapter aims to provide a discussion of social media, including its prevalence, motivations for use, parental and professional involvement, and both the advantages and disadvantages of social media use, with a specific emphasis on adolescence as a critical stage of development. Through exploration of these issues, it is intended to provide a greater understanding of the complex dynamics of social media use among adolescents as background to the interpretation of the research findings that will be presented in Chapter 3.

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA

In this section, social media will be conceptualised, and the increasing popularity of social media over recent years will be discussed.

2.2.1 Defining social media

Social media is a concept that proves challenging to define comprehensively due to the dynamic nature of the technological landscape. The ever-evolving nature of digital platforms and their diverse applications across multiple disciplines contribute to the complexity of pinpointing a singular definition for social media. Therefore, attempting

to impose a definitive description on social media poses obstacles when it comes to formulating theories concerning its impact and usage (Carr, 2015:46-47). Instead, acknowledging the fluidity and adaptability of social media as it continues to evolve allows for a more subtle understanding of its complex role in society. However, if seeking a definition, social media can be defined as diverse online platforms that facilitate users' verbal and visual interactions with others (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020:80).

At the core of social media lies the ability for users to generate and share content through digital platforms (Best, Manktelow & Taylor, 2014:27; Carr & Hayes, 2015:49). This user-generated content covers a wide range of media, such as text, images, videos, and interactive elements, enabling individuals to actively participate in online communities, create digital connections, and engage in social interactions on a global scale (De La Hoz, 2021:32). In the digital age, the flexibility and adaptability of social media continue to expand their diverse applications across various domains, shaping the way people communicate, collaborate, and access information (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:326).

Virtual worlds provide digital spaces where users can engage in simulated environments and activities, distorting the line between reality and the digital realm (Allen et al., 2014:20; Sinclair, Purves-Tyson, Allen & Weickert, 2014:18). These platforms rely on the Internet to facilitate communication and interaction among users, enabling them to access, contribute to, and explore the vast array of content and experiences available in the ever-changing world of social media (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:800). Social media online tools and features bring people with a common set of traits and characteristics together to create content that gives a sense of intrinsic meaning and value (Carr, 2015:49). According to Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schmukle, Egloff & Gosling (2010:372) social media mirrors people's environments. It allows facial images, encourages social behaviour, holds content on the world's thoughts and provides personal content about a person or certain communities.

SNS play an important role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and how others perceive them in the digital realm (Allen et al., 2014:20). By participating in these virtual communities, people can express their interests, beliefs, and values, thus

forming a sense of identity that is distinct from their offline persona. It is important to acknowledge that online profiles do not always represent someone's real identity (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2). The idealised virtual-identity theory indicates that most profile owners do not expose their actual personalities, but rather choose to reveal their idealised characteristics to the online world (Back et al., 2010:372). People tend to show the best versions of themselves by choosing the best images and most attractive content that will draw the online community to them (Fardouly, Magson, Rapee, Johnco & Oar, 2020:1307).

2.2.2 Social media platforms

The global availability of the Internet makes social media increasingly accessible to an inestimable number of individuals, and it serves a variety of purposes within society as a whole (Lindsay, 2011:1; Sajithra & Patil, 2013:69). The use of social media is particularly widespread among young people, especially those between the ages of 16 and 24, and has become a crucial part of their everyday lives (Glover & Fitch, 2018:171; Hausmann et al., 2017:714).

The broad accessibility of mobile devices has paved the way for various modes of interaction and communication, including through social media (Kreutzer, 2009:ii). This accessibility has led to the rise of numerous platforms for social interaction and connection within social media. Categories range from SNS like Facebook, TikTok, SnapChat, Instagram, microblogs such as Twitter, blogs on platforms like World Press, rich site summary (RSS) feeds, bookmarking sites like Pinterest, audio podcasting through Audacity, video podcasting on YouTube, as well as linking and posting on LinkedIn, and content rating (Jue, Marr & Kassotakis, 2010:5; Lindsay, 2011:1; Sajithra & Patil, 2013:73-74). Social media platforms offer a wide range of functionalities adapted to various user needs, as in the following examples:

- ***Facebook***

Facebook is a comprehensive social networking site that features a multitude of tools for sharing posts, photos, and videos, and incorporates Messenger for direct messaging (Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov & Stillwell, 2015:543).

- ***Twitter***

Twitter specialises in microblogging, allowing users to share real-time information through tweets, retweets, and follows (Wang & Zhuang, 2018:1159).

- ***Instagram***

Instagram on the other hand, is designed for sharing visual content like photos and videos, featuring Stories and Reels for ephemeral or more curated content (Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015:552).

- ***LinkedIn***

Engaging the professional community, *LinkedIn* serves as a networking hub where people can connect with colleagues, endorse skills, and explore job opportunities (Roulin & Levashina, 2019:187-188).

- ***Snapchat***

SnapChat offers a unique take on social media with its self-deleting messages and stories, appealing to a younger adolescent demographic (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck & Falk, 2016:958-959).

- ***YouTube***

YouTube is a platform dedicated primarily to video-sharing, where users can upload, view, and comment on a variety of videos (Madathil, Rivera-Rodriguez, Greenstein & Gramopadhye, 2015:173-174).

- ***Pinterest***

Pinterest focuses on discovery, allowing users to 'pin' images or videos to their personal boards (Han, Choi, Chun, Kwon, Kim & Choi, 2014:15-16).

- ***Reddit***

Reddit is a community-driven platform where user-created boards, or "subreddits," host content that can be upvoted or downvoted by the community (Proferes, Jones, Gilbert, Fiesler & Zimmer, 2021:1).

- ***TikTok***

TikTok offers a platform for short-form videos and live communications targeting a mobile audience. TikTok permits usage for individuals aged 13 and above, while direct messaging functionality is restricted to users aged 16 and older (Montag, Yang & Elhai, 2021:2).

- ***WhatsApp***

Lastly, *WhatsApp* serves primarily as a messaging application but has extended its functionality to include voice and video calls, even accommodating business-related

features (Montag, Błaszkiewicz, Sariyska, Lachmann, Andone, Trendafilov, Eibes & Markowetz, 2015:2).

In summary, the landscape of social media is constantly changing, adapting to the emerging needs of the population, and thereby making it easy to include SNS as part of our daily lives (Montag et al., 2015:1). Social media has gained increasing popularity, also in South Africa.

2.2.3 The increasing popularity of social media

Over the years, there has been a notable increase in Internet usage among individuals in South Africa, with the percentage of the population accessing the Internet rising from 47% to 72% from 2013 to 2021 (World Bank, 2021). The country has witnessed substantial growth in social media activities in recent years due to the expansion of Internet access. In 2017 alone, 15 million South Africans were already active social media users, defined as those regularly engaging with social media platforms (Coetzee, Leith & Schmulian, 2019:6). This increase is part of a broader trend towards technological advancement, creating an ‘online generation’ in South Africa.

This exponential growth reflects the increasing importance of digital connectivity in our society, bridging geographical distances, facilitating access to information, and enabling various online activities. Similarly, on a global scale, the embrace of Internet usage reached approximately 4 billion people just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, highlighting the pervasive nature of technology in our daily lives (Lochner, Albertella, Kidd, Ioannidis, Grand, Stein & Chamberlain, 2022:229).

Among today's youth, social media has emerged as a dominant force, shaping their social interactions, self-expression, and worldview. Teenagers and young adults, often referred to as "digital natives", have grown up in a digital age, where social media platforms serve as virtual gathering spaces, forums for self-expression, and avenues for social connection (Allen et al., 2014:18). For this demographic group, social media is not just a tool but an integral aspect of their culture, education, and overall lifestyle (Allen et al., 2014:18; Vanucci et al., 2020:259).

Recent studies have highlighted the pervasive use of social media among adolescents in the United States, with between 93% and 97% of individuals aged 13 to 17 actively engaging on at least one social media platform (Vannucci et al., 2020:259). This

profound engagement extends beyond mere participation, with some teenagers maintaining a presence on an average of three different social media platforms and some actively using as many as eight platforms daily (Vannucci et al., 2020:259)

According to Kelly et al. (2018:59) social media "has become the primary form of communication for young people in the UK and elsewhere". Furthermore, social media attracts more than half of the preadolescents, despite the age restriction of 13 years on most social media platforms. Research indicates that adolescents choose to engage in appearance-based activities, allowing them to edit and filter images of themselves, thus selectively choosing which content to reveal to the online world (Bell, 2019:4). The use of social media among adolescents has risen sharply in recent years, as seen in an American survey, which showed that between 2012 and 2018, the percentage of teenagers (13-17 years) using social media doubled from 34% to 70%. Moreover, 16% of these teens reported checking their social media continuously, with another 27% admitting to checking their accounts every hour (Statista, 2018). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are key enablers of this increased connectivity, providing access to a wide range of web-based platforms where adolescents can freely express and share their views. Social media platforms have become global forums for conversation, empowering adolescents to voice their opinions and enabling them to be heard by the online world (Akram & Kumar, 2017:802; Best et al., 2014:27; Chambers, 2013:1; Park & Kwon, 2018:2).

However, alongside the numerous benefits of social media use, there are also significant challenges and risks, particularly concerning adolescents' mental health and physical well-being (Keles et al., 2020:81). Research findings highlight the effects of excessive use of social media, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness among young people (Allen et al., 2014:19). With the Internet accessible to all, platforms like chatrooms and specialised forums not only foster networking but also serve as underground markets for various illegal online activities, including child pornography and prostitution. Online sex crimes, such as online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) through social networking sites (SNSs), may involve children in activities such as exchanging explicit images, interacting with the pornography industry, and engaging in sexually explicit conversations (De La Hoz, 2021:33). Moreover, the pervasive nature of social media presents challenges for parents, who may struggle to fully comprehend and address the complex relationship

between social media use and adolescent development (Goodyear, Armour & Wood, 2019:675).

2.3 ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

The adolescent phase is often a complex journey, and transitioning between childhood and adulthood is one of the most interesting periods in human development (Sanders, 2013:354). Spanning from approximately ages 12 to 21 years, this phase can be divided into three age groups, namely early adolescence (12-14 years), middle adolescence (15-17 years) and late adolescence (18-21 years) (Sanders, 2013:355). However, in South Africa, an individual is seen as a child up to 18 years of age (Louw & Louw, 2014a:387-388). The adolescent phases are marked by a series of intense physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that shape the foundation for an individual's future (Dahl, Allen, Wilbrecht & Suleiman, 2018:441).

Erik Erikson emphasised that adolescence is characterised by the psychosocial dilemma of "Identity vs. Role Confusion," wherein individuals explore various roles and facets of themselves to establish a solid identity (Erikson, 1968:132). Additionally, Dahl et al. (2018:442) elaborate on the notion of adolescents navigating a dynamic landscape filled with both challenges and opportunities presented by peers, adults, and societal institutions. Adolescence thus requires embarking on a journey of self-discovery marked by a series of experiences, both successes and setbacks, which foster increasing independence and self-awareness. Ultimately, within the context of family, culture, and society, adolescents must cultivate an adult identity embedded with personal aspirations, values, and priorities (Dahl et al., 2018:442). This process involves adolescents questioning their roles, beliefs, values, and dreams, as they strive to define who they are and who they want to become as an adult. It's a journey of reflection often accompanied by periods of self-doubt and constant experimentation, as individuals are challenged with defining their unique identities and discovering where they fit within the larger society (Allen et al., 2014:20) Also, part of adolescent development involves their evolving relationships, particularly with peers. Adolescents are drawn to their peers, seeking acceptance and validation in ways that can significantly impact their emotional well-being (Allen et al., 2014:19). Friendships and social interactions provide vital support structures, influence decision-making, and play a pivotal role in shaping an adolescent's self-concept (Allen et al., 2014:19).

Additionally, cognitive abilities continue to mature during this phase, allowing adolescents to engage in more abstract thinking, complex problem-solving, and decision-making (Dumontheil, 2016:39-40). These newfound cognitive skills equip them to consider hypothetical scenarios, evaluate moral and ethical dilemmas, and make decisions that may have consequences for their futures.

Throughout adolescence, the young person also undergoes various physical transformations, including a growth spurt and the onset of sexual maturation, which frequently coincides with shifts in body image perception (Vijayakumar, de Macks, Shirtcliff & Pfeifer, 2018:417-418). As adolescents embark on the quest for autonomy and independence, they often experience an increase in emotional intensity and stress (Eiland & Romeo, 2013:163). Emotions during this period can be intense, leading to unregulated feelings that range from excessive joy to extreme sadness. These emotional fluctuations are not only influenced by hormonal changes but also by the ongoing development of the brain areas responsible for emotional regulation (Arnett, 2016:349; Louw & Louw, 2014a:303, 305, 310; Steinberg, 2005:71, 73). In the following section on adolescent development, the aspects of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development will be discussed.

2.3.1 Physical development

Physical development during adolescence is marked by rapid growth, the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics, and brain restructuring (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:418). Their bodily changes heighten adolescents' sensitivity to social and emotional stimuli, encouraging their pursuit of independence and self-determination.

The physiological changes during adolescence are marked by growth spurts. For girls, these growth spurts typically start between the ages of 10 and 13 and settle around 16 years. For boys, they appear a bit later, between 12 and 15 years, and may extend into their early 20’s (Berenbaum, Beltz & Corley, 2015:56, 57; Brown, Patel & Darmawan, 2017:153) discuss that during these growth spurts, muscles develop rapidly in both girls and boys, although boys typically gain more muscle mass than girls. Girls, on the other hand, often accumulate more fat, especially in areas like the breasts, hips, and their buttocks (Berenbaum et al., 2015:56; Brown et al., 2017:153). The growth spurts that activate muscle and fat distribution may affect adolescents’ body image and may possibly lead to issues related to their self-esteem (Selemon,

2013:5.) For many adolescents, these physical changes can become a process of either pride or insecurity, depending on how they associate with societal standards and expectations (Leone, Wise, Mullin, Harmon, Moreno & Drewniany, 2015:71). Accepting the change in physical appearance is considered an essential developmental task during the adolescent phase (Louw & Louw, 2014a:310). Failure to successfully manage this aspect can lead to body image challenges and could potentially harm the adolescent's psychological well-being (Louw & Louw, 2014a:310).

The brain continues to develop into early adulthood, with research suggesting that it fully matures at the age of 24 years (Arain, Haque, Johal, Mathur, Nel, Rais, Sandhu & Sharma, 2013:450). From a neurobiological perspective, it is important to understand that the prefrontal cortex, a region responsible for complex planning, decision-making, and controlling social behaviour, is among the last to develop. Delayed maturation can contribute to the risk-taking and emotionally impulsive behaviour often observed in adolescents (Caballero, Granberg & Tseng, 2016:5; Willoughby, Good, Adachi, Hamza & Tavernier, 2014:315, 316).

Hormonal changes during adolescence are largely regulated by the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal (HPG) axis (Dahl et al., 2018:441). The activation of this axis leads to the production of sex hormones like testosterone in boys and oestrogen in girls, which are responsible for the development of secondary sexual characteristics (Berk, 2013:203; Dahl et al., 2018:441). Research indicates that oestrogen levels in adolescent girls can increase by about 20 times their pre-pubertal levels and boys' testosterone levels increase to between 18-20 times. Sexual maturation marks another critical milestone. For girls, this stage is often identified by the start of the menstrual cycle, while for boys, it includes changes in the testes and enlargement of the penis (Berk, 2013:203). For both boys and girls, these hormonal changes influence both primary and secondary sexual characteristics (Arnett, 2016:350-351). The psychological growth of adolescents can significantly hinge upon the timing of their physical and sexual maturation (Louw & Louw, 2014a:310).

2.3.2 Cognitive and emotional development

Cognitive development or cognitive growth in adolescents pertains to the gradual improvement and enhancement of cognitive abilities, such as thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, memory, and decision-making skills (Babakr, Mohamedamin &

Kakamad, 2019:520). In his theory of cognitive development, Jean Piaget proposed that the formal operational stage – the stage usually linked to the adolescent life stage – represents the final phase of cognitive development in children. Nevertheless, it's essential to recognise that not all adolescents may reach the formal operational stage due to variations in educational and environmental backgrounds (Babakr et al., 2019:520; Louw et al., 2014:25). However, those adolescents who do progress to this stage experience notable advancements in their capacity to comprehend and analyse information, engage in abstract thinking, and plan for the future (Babakr et al., 2019:520).

Piaget not only formulated the theory of cognitive development but also introduced the concept of 'egocentrism.' This concept denotes a child's difficulty in distinguishing between their viewpoint and that of others during interactions. When applied to adolescents progressing through the formal operational phase, egocentrism underscores their vulnerability to social and peer pressure, as adolescents often perceive situations as revolving around them, leading to feelings of pressure and the desire to conform to societal norms (Popovac & Hadlington, 2020:277). Metacognition also emerges at this phase, strengthening adolescents' capacity for self-regulation and decision-making (Weil, Fleming, Dumontheil, Kilford, Weil, Rees, Dolan & Blakemore, 2013:264). Metacognition refers to the awareness and understanding of one's cognitive processes, enabling individuals to think about their thinking and thereby optimising learning and problem-solving strategies and skills that are vital for day-to-day interactions (Weil et al., 2013:264). While individuals vary greatly in their ability to manage emotions, adolescence is viewed as a sensitive period when this skill may be particularly influenced by the social and emotional environment (Casey, Heller, Gee & Cohen, 2019:29-30).

As discussed above, the brain is physically only fully developed by about 24 years of age, especially the frontal lobes (Arain et al., 2013:450). Emotional regulation can be challenging to balance during the adolescent phase, since adolescents experience a heightened sensitivity to emotionally charged stimuli and situations, a characteristic of this life stage that has been linked to the still-maturing prefrontal cortex; the brain area linked to planning and organising behaviour (Sinclair et al., 2014:1584). Synaptic pruning still takes place during adolescence. Synaptic pruning is the process whereby weaker or unnecessary synaptic connections – the connections between neural cells

– in the brain are eliminated to optimise neural functioning and cognitive development (Arain et al., 2013:455; Selemon, 2013:2,3). This process is particularly active during early childhood and adolescence and is proven important since synaptic pruning and the formation of new neural pathways enhance cognitive abilities such as planning, problem-solving, and moral judgments and is also the drive of an adolescent's mood and impulsive behaviour (Arain et al., 2013:455). An influx of hormones not only influences physical changes; it also impacts emotional regulation (Arain et al., 2013:455). Dopamine levels in adolescents are higher than in adults, affecting both mood and pleasure-seeking behaviour (Wahlstrom, Collins, White & Luciana, 2010:9). Nonetheless, some studies have linked abnormal dopamine levels to various emotional and behavioural issues in adolescents, including depression and anxiety disorders.

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that plays a critical role in mood regulation, social behaviour, appetite, and other functions in the human body. Its levels can fluctuate widely during adolescence since the serotonin system is still maturing, contributing to emotional instability and behavioural changes. The serotonin transporter, which plays a key role in re-up taking serotonin from the synaptic cleft, undergoes significant changes in its expression during adolescence (Selemon, 2013:4). These changes may also contribute to mood swings and emotional irregularities commonly observed during this developmental phase (Arain et al., 2013:455). Furthermore, low levels of serotonin are associated with impulsivity and aggressive behaviour (Glick, 2015:143). Serotonin also has a collaborative effect with other neurotransmitters like dopamine. Increased serotonin can inhibit dopamine release, potentially decreasing some of the dopamine-driven risk-taking behaviours seen in adolescents. This complex interaction between serotonin and other neurotransmitters adds another layer of complexity to adolescent behaviour and emotional regulation (Sinclair et al., 2014:1584; Wahlstrom et al., 2010:9).

As adolescents engage in romantic relationships, they experience new, intense emotions related to love and intimacy (Soller, 2014:57). Their emotional sensitivity is further highlighted by various successes or failures, featuring their evolving emotional reactivity (Soller, 2014:58). Furthermore, cognitive growth helps refine emotional regulation coping mechanisms, although this is still an ongoing process during adolescence up to adulthood. It is important to take into consideration that emotional

experiences of adolescents are also shaped from a macro eco-systemic perspective, such as cultural norms, family structures in different contexts, and societal expectations, leading to a diversity of emotional coping strategies across different cultures (Guyer, Silk & Nelson, 2016:75).

2.3.3 Personality, social and moral development

Throughout adolescence, individuals experience various developmental challenges and opportunities that shape their journey towards maturity. Enhanced cognitive abilities during this time enable adolescents to delve deeper into self-reflection, gaining new insights into their identity and personality (Louw & Louw, 2014a:339-340)

In terms of identity formation, Erik Erikson proposes that the primary objective for adolescents is to establish their personal identity or sense of self (Louw & Louw, 2014a:342). According to Erik Erikson, adolescence is marked by the psychosocial crisis of identity vs. role confusion, where the challenge, as discussed above, lies in developing a strong sense of self (Kroger, 2006:207). The sense of self refers to an individual's perception of themselves, including their traits, beliefs, and behaviours that form their identity and personal reality (Martela & Steger, 2016:532). Identity formation involves cognitive and emotional aspects, such as self-image and self-esteem, and is considered critical for psychological well-being and healthy development in any person (Arnett, 2016:23). The formation of identity is an essential element in adolescent development, influenced by complex interactions of cognitive, emotional, and social factors, and usually develops around the age of 12-18 years (Erikson, 1968:22; Louw et al., 2014:22). Cognitive maturation, particularly in terms of Piaget's formal operational stage as discussed above, lays the groundwork for the development of the self-perception (Babakr et al., 2019:520; Piaget, 1954:39; Louw et al., 2014:25). Social interactions, including peer relationships, provide a context for adolescents to validate or adapt specific roles and traits that are socially acceptable (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017:44).

Another developmental aspect that should be considered as important is the development of gender identity and sexual orientation during adolescence, since it may have implications for social development. Adolescents explore and express their sexual and gender identities in ways that affect their social interactions and relationships (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008:351; Katz-Wise, Rosario & Tsappis,

2016:29). For example, adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+ may face unique social challenges such as discrimination or lack of acceptance from peers and family. On the other hand, an inclusive environment that embraces diversity can significantly contribute to positive self-esteem and social well-being (Russell & Fish, 2016:125).

Family dynamics also contribute to shaping an adolescent's sense of self; a balanced and supportive family environment enhances positive self-perception. An unstable or conflict-ridden family environment can negatively impact an adolescent's self-concept and identity formation. Such a setting may reinforce a poor sense of self by engendering feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, or unworthiness (Van Dijk, Branje, Keijsers, Hawk, Hale & Meeus, 2014:1862). Dysfunctional family relationships can negatively influence the foundational support that adolescents require for healthy emotional and cognitive development (Khaleque, Uddin, Shirin, Aktar & Himi, 2016:670). The lack of support may influence the adolescent's overall sense of well-being and contribute to poor coping strategies or behaviours, such as substance abuse or delinquency. Consequently, the family environment plays a crucial role in shaping an adolescent's self-concept, for better or for worse (Khaleque et al., 2016:669-670).

During adolescence, the urge for autonomy becomes greater, as individuals strive to become independent beings. This developmental change may lead adolescents away from parental control and towards the formation of independent relationships with peers (Inguglia, Ingoglia, Liga, Lo Coco & Lo Cricchio, 2015:2). Ironically, parents or caregivers may also decide to reduce their involvement and influence during this time, making peer relationships the primary source of social connection for adolescents (Berk, 2013:579; Inguglia et al., 2015:2). Adolescents not only spend more time with peers but also value their opinions and judgments during this time. Peer groups act as a supportive social connection and network that facilitates the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood (Louw & Louw, 2014a:367; Thomas, 2005:93-94).

The influence of peer relationships on an adolescent's identity formation is important to take into consideration when discussing adolescent social and moral development, since peer influence may play a significant role amongst adolescents who are experiencing an identity crisis (Louw et al., 2014:22). Peer relationships provide a platform where adolescents can experiment with various roles, ideologies, and

personas in a relatively safe or unsafe environment, which is important for identity formation (O'Kane, 2019:74-75).

Peer influence can be experienced as positive or negative. A supportive peer environment can facilitate a more secure sense of self by offering validation and acceptance (Santrock, 2018:381; O'Kane, 2019:75; Glover & Fitch, 2018:172). Though too much concern about peer approval and the fear of social exclusion may lead to conforming to group norms or behaviours that are in conflict with an individual's genuine self, thereby worsening the experience of identity confusion (Popovac & Hadlington, 2020:278).

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory on moral development proposes that adolescents often align their moral values and behaviours with the societal norms and expectations influenced by their family and community (Louw & Louw, 2014a:379, 381; Arnett, 2016:832). Additionally, one of the crucial developmental tasks they face is the building of their value system, which they may at times question, or which may differ from the established norms of their family or society (Sigelman, De George, Cunial & Rider, 2018:419). Moral development is a vital component of social development. In this respect, Sigelman et al. (2018:419) identified that certain adolescents may conceptualise being moral as expressing attributes like fairness, honesty, and empathy towards others. Parental influence, school environment, and broader societal values shape the adolescent's moral compass (Louw & Louw, 2014a:370, 385, 387). However, during adolescence moral beliefs, practices and values might be questioned; this is a key developmental task in forming their moral systems. Moral maturation is crucial as adolescents transition into adulthood (Sigelman et al., 2018:419).

Places like schools and extracurricular activities are places where adolescents can engage in social roles, teamwork, and interactions that influence their moral development. Through group projects, sports, and various clubs, adolescents learn how to cooperate with others, negotiate conflicts, and become part of a team. Team sports can also play a critical role in developing teamwork skills, emotional regulation, and understanding, practicing rules and fairness (Holt et al., 2017:422). These experiences can help adolescents develop a sense of responsibility and ethical values that can guide their decision-making on a day-to-day basis (Eccles, 1999:17; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005:19).

The above discussion on adolescent development illustrates the influence of all ecological levels in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on the adolescent life stage. These systems include those closest to the adolescent – the microsystem, which includes the home, school and peer group – and the interactions between them, indicating the mesosystem, up to the socio-cultural norms and values of the macrosystem (Berk, 2013:27-28; Louw et al., 2014:29-30).

Referring to an ecological techno-subsystem, Johnson and Puplampu (2008:5) state that interactions on the Internet form part of the microsystem, thus the primary ecological system in which children and adolescents develop. As mentioned earlier, the Internet and social media platforms have become an integral part of many adolescents' daily lives.

2.4. ADOLESCENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Adolescents are notably engaging in the digital world, particularly within social networking platforms. In a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics, it was found that an overwhelming 95% of teenagers possess a smartphone, which serves as a gateway to social media platforms and mobile applications (Hill, Ameenuddin, Chassiakos, Cross, Radesky, Hutchinson, Levine, Boyd, Mendelson & Moreno, 2016:2). It was found that 95% of teenagers are engaged with at least one social media site, with many managing a diverse array of platforms beyond Facebook, such as Twitter and Instagram, forming a comprehensive "social media portfolio." Additionally, mobile apps or applications offer a variety of functionalities, including photo sharing, gaming, and video chatting.

Since research findings indicate that social media use is one of the most popular leisure activities amongst adolescents, some research studies are directed towards collecting data on the type of leisure activities adolescents regularly choose to interact with (Bányai et al., 2017:1). A study by the Pew Research Centre in the United States (Lenhart, 2015:32) highlighted that a vast majority, 81%, of teenagers with Internet access actively engage with Facebook. Similar results is evident in Australia, where research conducted in 2011 indicates that an overwhelming 88% of individuals aged 15 to 17 engage with social networking sites (Allen et al., 2014:19). In the 2022 *Disrupting Harm in South Africa* study conducted by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF (2022:30), several noteworthy trends were observed concerning the online behaviours

of 1,639 South African children aged 9-17. The study found that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were used by 84% of the surveyed children. Educational engagement was also high, with 80% using the Internet for schoolwork. Information-seeking behaviours were notable as well; 75% searched for new information online, and 60% looked for information about school or study opportunities. Instant messaging apps like Viber, WhatsApp, and Telegram were used by 74% of the participants. Entertainment was also a significant activity, with 70% watching video clips (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). The study further revealed that 41% of the children interacted online with people from various places or backgrounds, while 44% followed celebrities or public figures on social media. Communication with distant family or friends accounted for 43%, and 38% of the participants sought health information online either for themselves or for others (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). According to the survey, it was observed that among 1,639 participants, 58% accessed the Internet at least daily. Age appeared to be a factor in frequency, with children 16-17 years old who were more likely to use the Internet more frequently compared to younger children. Furthermore, the study also found no significant difference in the frequency of Internet use when comparing children based on gender or their residence in urban or rural settings (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:6).

The growth in technological usage has roots in parents' early beliefs that familiarising their adolescents with computers and the Internet would prepare them for the evolving information age. However, adolescents have expanded their online activities beyond educational purposes to include entertainment (Visnjic, Velickovic, Stojanovi, Milosevic, Rangelov, Bulatovic, Stankovic & Miljkovic, 2015:64-65). Consequently, today's adolescents are growing up in a landscape where social media use continues to become more widespread (Visnjic et al., 2015:65). Social networking platforms have become the primary mode of communication for many young people, largely replacing traditional methods such as email and instant messaging. Even children as young as 12 to 13 years old are actively engaging with platforms like Facebook (Oberts et al., 2017:52). These online spaces offer adolescents a unique avenue to construct and express their identities, serving both as a means of self-promotion and a way to fit in with various social groups; a dynamic often challenging to navigate in face-to-face interactions (Cookingham & Ryan, 2013:2).

As highlighted above, adolescents today are deeply entrenched in the digital age, with

social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp serving as integral components of their daily lives (Van Den Eijnden, Geurts, Ter Bogt, Van Der Rijst & Koning, 2021:2). A study with Dutch adolescents discussed the pervasiveness of smartphones among adolescents, with a staggering 98% ownership rate among those aged 12-15 years, which underscores the profound influence of social media on this demographic (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2). It is not uncommon for approximately 31% of adolescents to acknowledge using social media on their smartphones throughout the entire day, highlighting the omnipresence and impact of digital connectivity (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2; Kelly et al., 2018:59-60).

The prevalence of SNS in the adolescent experience is evident, with research highlighting several positive outcomes associated with their use. These include the effective management and engagement of social connections, opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration, a boost in self-esteem, and the fulfilment of the fundamental need for social belonging (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). Adolescents actively share personal information on these platforms, ranging from photos and videos to updates on their daily lives, school-related details, and even contact information like birthdates and email addresses (Hausmann et al., 2017:715; Hawk et al., 2019:65). The widespread adoption of the "selfie" culture further illustrates the extent of personal sharing on social media platforms (Hawk et al., 2019:66).

Given the significance of peer relationships during adolescence, it is common for adolescents to engage in co-viewing, sharing, and discussing media content with their peers. Studies have also shown gender differences in social media usage, with girls typically spending more time on these platforms compared to boys (Kelly et al., 2018:62). This underscores the pivotal role of social networking sites in the socialization and identity development of adolescents, shaping their online interactions and digital presence in profound ways.

2.5 THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADOLESCENTS

Adolescence, as highlighted by Louw and Louw (2014a:303), serves as a pivotal developmental bridge between childhood and adulthood, typically spanning from ages 11 to 18. This transitional phase encompasses a multitude of changes across physical, cognitive, emotional, moral, and social dimensions, making it a crucial period in human growth and maturation (Dahl et al., 2018:441). Unique individual and cultural factors

intertwine to shape the experiences of each adolescent (Arnett, Sugimura & Zukauskiene, 2014:569; Berk, 2013:6). Amidst this transformative journey, the influence of social media on adolescents emerges as a topic of both intrigue and concern, offering a variety of advantages and disadvantages. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in the USA revealed diverse perspectives among adolescents, with 31% viewing social media as primarily positive, 24% perceiving it as largely negative, and 45% holding a neutral stance (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5). In the subsequent sections, this discussion will focus on the effects of social media on adolescents.

2.5.1 Physical effects of social media

Social media has influenced adolescent development, offering both advantages and disadvantages that can have an impact on their physical development. While social media platforms provide new opportunities for self-expression, communication, and identity formation (Bányai et al., 2017:2; Hausmann et al., 2017:715), they also come with potential disadvantages that can impact physical health and body dissatisfaction (Keles et al., 2020:81).

According to a national survey, most adolescents prefer to conduct a Google search on symptoms of both physical and mental health issues before speaking to an adult or healthcare provider (Maitz, Maitz, Sendlhofer, Wolfsberger, Mautner, Kamolz & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2020:2; Radovic, McCarty, Katzman & Richardson, 2018:2). Social media platforms may serve as a valuable resource for health-related information and websites such as MedlinePlus and WebMD offer credible, general health advice that is easily accessible online (Maitz et al., 2020:2). Regarding sexual health concerns, adolescents are utilising platforms like Planned Parenthood's Roo app which aim to provide age-appropriate and scientifically accurate information (Guilamo-Ramos, Bouris, Jaccard, Gonzalez, McCoy & Aranda, 2011:160-161).

Moreover, adolescents who are unable to engage in conventional health programmes have discovered support in health behaviour change interventions offered through social media. Platforms like Facebook groups, Reddit's subreddits, and educational hubs such as Coursera provide access to course materials, community support, and discussion forums covering a wide range of health topics (Cavallo et al., 2020:1, 9; Ramo, Meacham, Kaur, Corpuz, Prochaska & Satre, 2019:12). Additionally,

specialised social networking sites offer adolescents valuable information to enhance their physical and mental well-being, potentially serving as alternatives or supplements to traditional treatments and extending services to those facing constraints such as limited time or resources (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:4; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175, 177).

However, while some of these applications are beneficial, it is important to take into consideration the adolescents' developmental ability to determine what is credible information and what is not credible (Eysenbach, 2008:124). The concern regarding adolescents' ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible information is supported by various studies that have researched adolescent critical thinking skills in the digital age. These studies include a Stanford University study that found that more than 80% of students could not distinguish between fake content and a real news story (Wineburg & McGrew, 2016:495). The use of unreliable information on the Internet can lead to increased physical irresponsibility among adolescents. For instance, when teens rely on inaccurate or misleading information about health symptoms, they may make poor choices that could worsen health problems (Wartella, Rideout, Montague, Beaudoin-Ryan & Lauricella, 2016:13-23).

The period of adolescence is a crucial time for physical development. As discussed above, the adolescent phase entails various social, emotional, moral and physical changes (Marciano, Camerini & Morese, 2021:1-2). During these formative years, attention to a healthy physical development is a necessity, not just for immediate benefits but also for long-term development (Patton, Sawyer, Santelli, Ross, Afifi, Allen, Arora, Azzopardi, Baldwin, Bonell, Kakuma, Kennedy, Mahon, McGovern, Mokdad, Patel, Petroni, Reavley, Taiwo, Waldfogel, Wickremarathne, Barroso, Bhutta, Fatusi, Mattoo, Diers, Fang, Ferguson, Ssewamala & Viner, 2016:6). Physical health in adolescence goes beyond the absence of disease; it includes a balanced diet, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, and effective stress management (Viner et al., 2012:1650).

Social media's influence in promoting a less physically active lifestyle may contribute to the rising rates of obesity among adolescents (Barth, 2015:206; Hsu et al., 2018:532). Many youths keep their smartphones nearby while sleeping, engage in prolonged online activity during nighttime hours, and remain vigilant for incoming

messages due to the fear of missing out (FOMO) on new information. Insufficient sleep or sleep disturbances may also contribute to adolescent obesity (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:3). Given that adolescents are in a critical stage for establishing lifelong healthy habits, it's crucial to address the negative impact of social media on their physical health (Park & Kwon, 2018:2). Extended periods spent on social media platforms detract from time that could be dedicated to physical activity, thereby heightening the risk of obesity among adolescents (Barth, 2015:206; Hsu et al., 2018:532).

However, the advantages of social media regarding physical development in adolescents should not be ignored. Studies, such as those by Cavallo et al. (2012) and Maher et al. (2014), suggest that social media can positively influence physical activity and development. A review showed that interactive computer-based interventions could increase physical activity by 44 minutes per week among adolescents (Maher et al., 2014:258). Considering the frequent activity on social media, it can serve as a platform for adolescents to share their physical achievements, get real-time feedback, and engage in friendly competition, all of which could serve as motivational factors. This finding is important because it highlights the potential for digital platforms to be used in ways that promote healthy behaviours amongst adolescents (Cavallo et al., 2012:527-532; Maher et al., 2014:258).

The effects of the use of SNS on aspects such as their sleep patterns and body weight can subsequently impact adolescents' mental well-being adversely, as discussed below.

2.5.2 Cognitive and emotional effects of social media

The impact of social media on adolescents' body image and self-esteem has been widely explored in recent research. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook play a significant role in shaping societal standards of appearance, often exacerbating pressure on young individuals to conform to these norms (Patton et al., 2016:6). This pressure frequently results in feelings of body dissatisfaction, which in turn can negatively impact self-esteem (Burnette, Kwitowski & Mazzeo, 2017:114-115).

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these influences as they navigate the complexities of identity formation and social acceptance (Inguglia et al., 2015:1-2). Constant exposure to carefully curated images of seemingly flawless bodies on social

media can create unrealistic expectations and perceptions of beauty. When adolescents compare themselves to these idealised images, they may experience heightened levels of anxiety, self-consciousness, and diminished self-esteem (Glover & Fitch, 2018:174; Kelly et al., 2018:60).

Moreover, the phenomenon of presenting false personas or idealised versions of oneself online further complicates matters. Individuals often portray an exaggerated or filtered version of their lives on social media, showcasing only the highlights while concealing insecurities or imperfections (Biernesser, Sewall, Brent, Bear, Mair & Trauth, 2020:9; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019:12). This can lead to a distorted sense of reality for adolescents, who may feel inadequate or inferior in comparison to their peers' online personas. The cumulative effect of these factors can contribute to a cycle of negative self-perception and emotional distress among adolescents (Biernesser et al., 2020:6). It is essential that parents, educators, and mental health professionals are aware of these dynamics and provide guidance and support to help adolescents manage the pressures of social media while fostering positive body image and self-esteem. Encouraging critical thinking skills, promoting media literacy, and fostering a supportive and inclusive online environment are crucial steps in mitigating the adverse effects of social media on adolescent well-being (Biernesser et al., 2020:11).

It has become a priority to understand the impact of social media use on adolescents' well-being, given the simultaneous increase in mental health problems. Social media serves to have both advantages and disadvantages, offering opportunities for individuals to express their thoughts and emotions and receive social support, while also being linked to psychological issues, as indicated by research (Keles et al., 2020:80). Adolescence is a critical phase for personal and social identity establishment, with a significant portion of this process now dependent on social media. Given adolescents' restricted ability for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer influence, they may find it challenging to avoid the potential negative impacts of social media usage. Consequently, they face an increased risk of developing mental disorders (Keles et al., 2020:81).

- **The interplay between social media and sleep patterns in adolescents**

Due to the increasing prevalence of social media use among adolescents, concerns about its potential adverse effects on adolescent health and well-being, particularly in

relation to sleep patterns, have been raised (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2). Sleep is a fundamental aspect of adolescent development, contributing to essential functions such as learning, memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and overall cognitive functioning (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2; Woods & Scott, 2016:41-43). Yet, inadequate or disrupted sleep has been associated with a myriad of negative outcomes, including attention deficits, academic underperformance, daytime fatigue, depressive symptoms, and heightened risk of obesity (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2). In addition, sleep deprivation associated with social media usage correlates with depression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (Woods & Scott, 2016:41-43).

Despite the critical role sleep plays in adolescent well-being, sleep problems are alarmingly prevalent among Dutch adolescents. A substantial portion of these demographic reports experiencing insufficient sleep, difficulties initiating and maintaining sleep, frequent sleep interruptions, and feeling unrefreshed upon waking (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2; Woods & Scott, 2016:41-43). While the detrimental effects of screen-based activities on sleep have been well-documented, longitudinal research specifically examining the relationship between social media use and sleep remains limited (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:2).

The unique characteristics of social media platforms may exacerbate sleep disturbances among adolescents. The constant availability of social interactions and fear of missing updates may lead to prolonged screen time, particularly during nighttime hours (Kelly et al., 2018:59-60). Additionally, exposure to online harassment and stress-inducing content can contribute to heightened anxiety and arousal levels, further disrupting sleep patterns (Kelly et al., 2018:59-60). Consequently, adolescents may experience increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and obesity as a result of sleep disturbances linked to social media usage (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:3; Woods & Scott, 2016:41-43).

Studies have consistently demonstrated the adverse effects of screen time on sleep health, primarily through delayed bedtimes and a reduction in the duration of sleep (LeBourgeois, Hale, Chang, Akacem, Montgomery-Downs & Buxton, 2017:s93). Several mechanisms may underlie these associations, including time displacement, psychological arousal from media content, and the disruptive effects of device-emitted light on circadian rhythms (LeBourgeois et al., 2017:s93). Healthy sleep patterns

during adolescence are vital for mitigating obesity risk, enhancing psychological well-being, improving cognitive function, and reducing engagement in risky behaviours (LeBourgeois et al., 2017:s93).

In light of these findings, prioritising healthy sleep habits among adolescents is paramount. Efforts to address the impact of social media on adolescent sleep must be integrated into family, educational, and clinical contexts, with a particular emphasis on promoting digital well-being and fostering responsible screen time usage (LeBourgeois et al., 2017:s93). Furthermore, continued research into the longitudinal effects of social media on sleep patterns is essential for the development of evidence-based interventions and policy initiatives that are aimed at safeguarding adolescent health and well-being.

- **FOMO, body image, cyberbullying, and harmful online sexual exposure**

The impact of social media on adolescents encompasses a wide array of psychological and emotional consequences, ranging from heightened anxiety and depression to distorted body image perceptions and exposure to explicit content. Adolescents today face unprecedented levels of mental health challenges, with generalised anxiety disorder and depression ranking among the most prevalent disorders in this demographic group (Keles et al., 2020:79). Alarmingly, there has been a surge of 70% in the prevalence of anxiety and depression among young people over the past 25 years, exerting profound adverse effects on their developmental trajectories (Keles et al., 2020:79). Since each social media platform is different in their functions and in its features, it may therefor differentially be linked to mental health (Fardouly et al., 2020:1306). Some studies indicate that having an image-based social media account and spending an excessive amount of time on it, may be linked with poor mental health (Fardouly et al., 2020:1305).

The pervasive influence of social media on adolescent well-being has prompted increased scrutiny, particularly in light of the simultaneous rise in mental health problems (Gentile, Bailey, Bavelier, Brockmyer, Cash, Coyne, Doan, Grant, Green, Griffiths, Markle, Petry, Prot, Rae, Rehbein, Rich, Sullivan, Woolley & Young, 2017:S83). Problematic internet behaviours, often likened to addiction, have raised concerns regarding the potential normalisation of unhealthy digital habits among adolescents (Keles et al., 2020:80). Activities such as excessive selfie posting, once

deemed narcissistic, have now become ingrained social norms within younger social circles (Keles et al., 2020:80). Moreover, social media's role in amplifying emotional states has been widely documented, with both positive and negative emotions being contagious through online interactions (Barth, 2015:201; Kramer et al., 2014 in Hausman et al., 2017:717). Online platforms provide avenues for adolescents to engage in emotionally meaningful interactions and manage their feelings in ways that traditional face-to-face interactions cannot replicate (Barth, 2015:203-204). However, the unhealthy use of social media poses significant risks to adolescent mental health. Research indicates that emotional investment in social media, particularly night-time usage, is associated with heightened levels of anxiety, depression, poor sleep quality, and low self-esteem (Woods & Scott, 2016:45).

The concept of 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) also plays a crucial role in the anxiety associated with social media use. The fear of not sharing in the rewarding experiences one's peers are having can lead to feelings of anxiety and lower mood states (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan & Gladwell, 2013). Adolescents who spend excessive time online, especially on SNS, are more prone to elevated anxiety and depression, possibly due to constant peer comparisons (Woods & Scott, 2016:41, 46). According to (Bányai et al., 2017:2) the biopsychosocial model indicated that an excessive use of social media creates cause for concern to certain behavioural addictions, such as changes in mood status, anxiety, panic attracts and, after a long use of social media, it indicated withdrawal symptoms.

Negative online content, such as idealised body images and cyberbullying, contributes to diminished self-esteem and psychological distress among adolescents (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3; Kelly et al., 2018:60). Social media's portrayal of idealised standards of beauty, weight, and lifestyle can lead to negative self-comparisons, resulting in body dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem among adolescents (Burnette et al., 2017:114-115; Glover & Fitch, 2018:174). Cyberbullying, in particular, poses severe threats to adolescents' mental health, often resulting in personal embarrassment, damaged relationships, and even suicide (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Cyberbullying refers to social networking platforms that may facilitate cyberbullying, which involves aggressive, deliberate actions by an individual or group using electronic communication. These actions are repeated over time and target a victim who is unable to defend themselves

easily (Memon, Sharma, Mohite & Jain, 2018:385).

Exposure to sexually explicit content, facilitated by easy access to pornography online, presents its own set of psychological challenges for adolescents. Sending sexual content to others through social media was related to sexual orientation, sexual interest, and earlier first sexual experiences among adolescents (Farré, Montejo, Agulló, Granero, Chiclana Actis, Villena, Maideu, Sánchez, Fernández-Aranda, Jiménez-Murcia & Mestre-Bach, 2020:9). Recent rates of pornography use among adolescents were reportedly around 43%, and 25.6% of adolescents used social media to obtain sexual information due to sexual interest (Farré et al., 2020:2). Unintentional exposure to pornographic material can evoke feelings of anxiety, guilt, and pressure to conform to unrealistic sexual standards portrayed in such content (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514). In South Africa, where Internet access is largely unregulated, the risks of encountering inappropriate material like pornography have escalated, exacerbating anxiety and emotional distress among adolescents (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:31; Shefer et al., 2015:141-152).

Additionally, research has found that exposure to sexually explicit online content is associated with several types of sexual risk-taking behaviours among adolescents (Beyens, Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015:2, 4). SNS allows adolescents and teenagers to send information at a rapid speed, enabling them to view sexual content in an uncontrolled manner. Another digital phenomenon affecting adolescents is sexting, the production and sending of sexual content via the Internet and smartphones (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608). This practice, facilitated by growing and easier Internet access and the widespread use of smartphones, is particularly relevant during adolescence, a stage characterised by the establishment of new intimate relationships and sexual exploration (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608; Buren & Lunde, 2018:211). Prevalence rates for sending sexual content among adolescents have been found to range from 2.5% to 27% (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608). Sexting involves the creation and transmission of sexual content through the Internet and smartphones. This practice includes sharing explicit messages, photos, or videos between individuals (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608). A sexting incident could leave a great deal of distress amongst peers, the victim and the perpetrator, since these messages and/or sexual content are often shared amongst peers (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson,

2011:802). It leaves lasting mental impacts not only on the perpetrator, but also the victims; it may thus leave the victim and the perpetrator emotionally distressed after a sexting incident took place (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:802).

The easy accessibility of pornography online has been linked to increased rates of sexual chat participation, earlier first sexual experiences, and higher instances of forced sharing of sexual content (Farré et al., 2020:9; Beyens et al., 2015:2, 4). Exposure to pornography online can contribute to anxiety, guilt, and pressure to conform to unrealistic sexual standards (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016:514). These findings highlight the critical need for comprehensive strategies to prevent the harmful effects of online content on adolescent sexual health and well-being.

Social media offers ample opportunities for connecting with others and for self-expression; however, its detrimental effects on adolescent mental health cannot be overlooked. Addressing these challenges is crucial.

- **Impact on adolescent self-esteem and vulnerabilities to self-harm and suicide**

In the United States, suicide is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 34 years (Hedegaard, Curtin & Warner, 2020:2). Researchers, practitioners and social workers have invested a great amount of time to determine the “why” of suicide (Hedegaard et al., 2020:1). The impact of social media on adolescent self-esteem and its potential vulnerabilities to self-harm and suicide is a growing concern. The relationship between engagement with negative online content and low self-esteem is well-documented, with low self-esteem characterised by a devalued perception of oneself (Andrews & Brown, 1995:23; Kelly et al., 2018:60). This negative online content not only presents risks in terms of the development of low self-esteem but also plays a significant role in adolescents' lives, affecting their social capital, self-expression, personal identity, and the fulfilment of their need to belong (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). The dual nature of social media's influence is further highlighted by its potential for holding both advantages and disadvantages, particularly in the context of youth suicide prevention and treatment (Biernesser et al., 2020:2). Vulnerable adolescents, such as those experiencing disorders associated with impulsivity and or depression, may be more exposed to harmful online content and cyberbullying, increasing their risk for self-harm and suicide (Biernesser et al., 2020:2).

The extensive sharing of personal information and potential for cyberbullying further exacerbate these issues, potentially leading to severe mental health consequences (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) among adolescents, a behaviour associated with future psychiatric outcomes and increased suicide risk, is linked to active social media engagement (Memon et al., 2018:855). Furthermore, there is a nuanced relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and mental health, with certain behaviours like Internet pornography consumption being associated with lower self-esteem and life satisfaction in some studies, but not others (Daschmann, Quiring & Weber, 2012: 410, Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:518; Weber et al., 2012; Vandenbosch, 2015:15). Notably, social media use has been positively associated with depression, especially among teenagers engaging in social comparisons with strangers (Memon et al., 2018:385).

The consumption of Internet pornography by adolescents is a challenge, with studies indicating varied impacts on mental health and self-esteem. Engagement with pornography has been linked to lower self-esteem, feelings of guilt and lower life satisfaction in some populations. For instance, adolescents with lower self-esteem were found to consume Internet pornography more frequently, suggesting a potential coping or escape mechanism for those dissatisfied with their lives or struggling with personal issues (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:518). The relationship between pornography consumption and self-esteem is complex in the field of research, influenced by factors such as perceived autonomy, self-efficacy, and gender orientation, with those identifying with hyperfeminine or hypermasculine orientations more likely to be exposed to violence-themed pornography (Weber et al., 2012: 410, 411; Vandenbosch, 2015:15). The exposure to and consumption of pornography can also influence adolescents' attitudes towards sex, relationships, and gender roles, potentially leading to unrealistic expectations and distorted perceptions of normal sexual behaviour (Farré et al., 2020:2).

In romantic and sexual relationships, sexting could be perceived as a form of intimate expression and communication; however, sexting is also associated with various problems, including risky sexual behaviours, the proliferation of child pornography, and a higher risk of online victimisation (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608; Buren& Lunde, 2018:211). Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to the negative

consequences of sexting due to their incomplete development in decision-making and awareness of long-term consequences (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608).

Moreover, sexting appears to be strongly gendered, influencing the quality of adolescents' sexting experiences and their motivations (Burén & Lunde, 2018:211). In qualitative interviews, boys have reported increasing their social capital and gaining peer popularity through sexting, while girls are more likely to face negative labels such as "sluts" for engaging in sexting behaviour (Burén & Lunde, 2018:211). Girls may also feel pressured to engage in sexting with peers or romantic partners. Additionally, adolescents' heightened self-consciousness and sensitivity to others' opinions, characteristic of adolescent egocentrism, may contribute to their engagement in online sexual encounters and risk-taking behaviours ultimately affecting their self-esteem, feelings of worth and affecting moral values and principles (Burén and Lunde, 2018:210).

In summary, while social media can enhance adolescents' social networks and self-esteem, it also poses significant risks to their mental health, particularly for those already vulnerable to issues of self-esteem and mental well-being. Despite the abovementioned risks, social media also offers significant opportunities for positive engagement, including the maintenance of social connections and access to mental health resources (Best et al., 2014:14; Biernesser et al., 2020:2). The balance between these positive and negative impacts underscores the importance of monitoring and guiding adolescent social media use to safeguard their mental health and well-being.

2.5.3 Social and moral effects of social media

Studies have emphasised the intricate dynamics of parent-child relationships, particularly in the phases of adolescence and emerging adulthood, where the balance between autonomy and relatedness plays a pivotal role (Inguglia et al., 2015:2; Wahlstrom et al., 2010:3). The way parents respond to their children's quest for autonomy significantly influences the development of individuality and the establishment of supportive bonds over time. In the realm of socialisation theory and research, there is a consensus that parenting styles emphasising autonomy and relatedness yield numerous benefits for adolescents' and emerging adults' adjustment (Wahlstrom et al., 2010:3).

Social media platforms present opportunities for adolescents to connect with their peers, share their experiences, and express their identities, significantly contributing to their social development and identity formation (Charoensukmongkol, 2018:75). These platforms serve as essential tools for teenagers to explore their interests, connect with others who share similar views, and receive social support. This is especially crucial for those who may not have access to supportive communities in their offline lives (Barth, 2015:206; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175). The online space offers a relatively safe environment for adolescents to experiment with their identities and present themselves in ways they might find challenging in the real world (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Davis, 2011:637).

During the critical period of identity development, adolescents often seek independence from their parents and look towards their peers, who are experiencing similar developmental stages, for support (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013:58-59). Instant messaging among peers has been highlighted as a key method for sharing emotional distress and seeking comfort, which can significantly enhance adolescents' mental health and well-being (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013:61). Social media, thus, becomes an indispensable platform for those seeking connections and support, particularly when face-to-face interactions are not feasible (Barth, 2015:206; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Weinstein & Davis, 2015:932).

Nonetheless, the anonymity of social media can also challenge adolescents' social as well as their moral development. The platform's easy access to diverse content and interactions with a wide audience can expose adolescents to socially unacceptable and harmful behaviours, such as cyberbullying and sexting, potentially influencing their moral values and norms (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3-4; Handschuh, La Cross & Smaldone, 2018:88). These dynamics can include the sharing of personal information, participation in online challenges, or the adoption of harmful behaviours portrayed as normative or desirable by their peers. Such online interactions can hinder the development of healthy social skills and the ability to form deep, meaningful relationships, as digital communications may prioritise superficial connections over genuine intimacy (Handschuh et al., 2018:88).

Given that adolescents are in the process of developing their moral compasses, the complex social situations encountered on social media present them with ethical

dilemmas that they must navigate, often without adult guidance (Weinstein & Davis, 2015:937). Excessive social media use can hamper parents' ability to engage with their adolescent children, thereby further limiting opportunities for guiding children in terms of social and moral skills. Using social media for extended periods of time may change how families interact, with more time spent on screens meaning less time talking to each other face-to-face. This can lead to disagreements about using phones or computers and make it harder for parents to help their children learn right from wrong (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:2). Families need to figure out how to enjoy the good parts of being online while still spending quality time together (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:2).

To foster a positive engagement with social media among adolescents, it is crucial for parents, educators, and policymakers to take an active role. They can guide youngsters in developing savvy Internet habits, encourage open discussions about online activities, and establish guidelines for social media usage. By promoting critical thinking and ethical decision-making, young individuals can navigate the complexities of social media with a clear understanding of their identity and moral compass (Weinstein & Davis, 2015:937).

However, the widespread availability of smartphones and computers, coupled with the allure of online gaming, video creation, and information sharing, can lead to addictive behaviours. Such habits may detrimentally impact students' academic performance and overall well-being (Salmela-Aro et al., 2017:343). Furthermore, adolescents experiencing loneliness or sadness may increasingly turn to the Internet for solace, potentially reducing their real-world interactions with friends and family, thus exacerbating feelings of isolation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:64; Kim, LaRose & Peng, 2009:451).

While social media can enhance feelings of connection and support, it has also been linked to the development of superficial relationships and a decrease in overall well-being (Hawk et al., 2019:71; Kross et al., 2013 in Barth, 2015:203). The nature of digital communication, though facilitating connections between individuals, may impede the formation of deep, meaningful relationships that are essential for healthy social engagement (Handschuh et al., 2018:88). Moreover, the anonymity provided by social media can lead to different forms of peer pressure, encouraging adolescents to

share personal details online, which may compromise their safety (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2). As mentioned earlier, one should not ignore the issue of adolescents sharing sexually explicit material on these platforms, which has also emerged as a major concern for experts, considering the potentially permanent damage to young people's reputations and future opportunities (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3-4; Handschuh, La Cross & Smaldone, 2018:88).

2.6 THE ROLE OF PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, EDUCATORS AND PROFESSIONALS IN ADOLESCENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Research highlights the pivotal role that parental behaviour and the establishment of clear, well-communicated rules play in decreasing problematic social media use among adolescents. The distinction between impulsive, reactionary limitations set by parents and structured, thoughtful guidance is critical, with the latter being more effective in promoting healthy social media habits (Koning, Peeters, Finkenauer & Van Den Eijnden, 2018:625; Valkenburg, Beyens, Meier & Vanden Abeele, 2022:5).

Structured parental guidance involves more than just setting boundaries; it includes open dialogue about the benefits and risks of social media, encouragement of critical thinking about online interactions, and fostering a sense of responsibility and self-regulation in the digital world (Valkenburg et al., 2022:5). This approach is rooted in a balanced family systems perspective, which emphasises the importance of a supportive and communicative family environment as a foundation for developing healthy online behaviours (Inguglia et al., 2015:2).

Moreover, the concept of restrictive mediation, which refers to the proactive establishment of rules concerning social media use, has been highlighted for its effectiveness (Koning et al., 2018:624). This includes setting limits on the amount of time spent on social media, monitoring the content that adolescents are exposed to, and discussing the rationale behind these rules to ensure understanding and compliance. Such measures are not meant to stifle adolescents but to protect them from potential harms and guide them towards constructive use of digital platforms (Koning et al., 2018:624-625).

Research findings suggest that when parents take an active, involved, and informed role in their children's digital lives, it can significantly reduce the risks associated with social media use, such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and other

forms of cyber aggression (West, Rice & Vella-Brodrick, 2023:2). Furthermore, a positive family context, characterised by open communication, mutual respect, and shared values, can empower adolescents to navigate the complexities of social media with confidence and discernment, ultimately enhancing their digital literacy and resilience in the face of online challenges (Valkenburg et al., 2022:4). Although research refers to parents, it is recognised that many children live with caregivers, which is defined in the Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 1, as "any person other than a parent or guardian, who factually cares for a child" and can include a foster parent or a person who cares for children in child and youth care centres (RSA, 2006).

Professionals across various fields, including psychology, social work, paediatrics, and education, play a crucial role in addressing the complexities of adolescent social media use (Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:03). Their expertise and interaction with adolescents place them in a unique position to influence healthy digital habits.

The involvement of professionals extends beyond the medical consultation room. In educational settings, teachers and educators are positioned to integrate digital literacy and responsible Internet use into the curriculum (Patton et al., 2016:5). By doing so, they not only equip students with the skills needed to navigate online spaces safely but also foster an environment that encourages critical thinking about the information and interactions they encounter on social media (Patton et al., 2016:5).

Marciano and Viswanath (2023:10) further suggest the importance of educational initiatives aimed at promoting positive online relationships and engagement with inspirational content. Such initiatives can take various forms, including school-based programmes that educate students about the ethical implications of online behaviour, workshops on digital empathy, and campaigns that encourage constructive interactions in digital communities. By highlighting the benefits of positive online engagement, these programmes aim to enhance adolescents' digital well-being, steering them towards content and interactions that uplift and inspire (Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:10).

Moreover, social workers and psychologists play a vital role in addressing the psychological impacts of social media use. Through counselling and therapeutic interventions, they can help adolescents develop healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with online stressors, such as cyberbullying or social comparison (Hetrick,

Cox, Witt, Bir & Merry, 2016:8). These professionals can also support families in navigating conflicts related to social media use, offering strategies for communication and boundary-setting that respect the adolescent's growing need for autonomy while ensuring their safety online.

Teachers, social workers and other professionals can therefore educate adolescents on using social media in a manner that employs the positive effects of social media use. The connection between heavy social media use and the quality of social relationships among adolescents, particularly girls, is a complex and nuanced topic. Recent research by West et al. (2023:2) highlights that while intensive social media use is associated with positive social relationships, it also necessitates a deeper examination of the nature and impact of these online interactions. This body of research points towards the potential for social media to serve as a valuable tool for fostering social connectedness, a particularly salient point for adolescents navigating the intricacies of their social worlds (West et al., 2023:3).

Social media platforms offer adolescents unique opportunities for socialisation, enabling them to maintain and strengthen existing relationships, forge new connections, and find communities of interest that may not be available in their immediate physical environments. For many girls, these platforms can be especially beneficial, providing spaces where they can express themselves, share experiences, and receive social support. This suggests that, when used mindfully, social media can play a significant role in satisfying adolescents' developmental needs for social interaction and belonging (Scott, Biello & Woods, 2019:2).

However, the positive correlation between social media use and social relationships does not automatically imply that all online interactions are beneficial or conducive to well-being. The quality of online relationships is a critical factor that influences how these interactions affect adolescents (West et al., 2023:2). High-quality relationships, characterised by mutual respect, understanding, and support, can enhance adolescents' sense of belonging and self-esteem, contributing positively to their mental health. Conversely, online interactions that involve negative experiences, such as cyberbullying, exclusion, or superficial engagement, can have detrimental effects on adolescents' psychological well-being (Biernesser et al., 2020:2).

Therefore, guiding adolescents towards healthy online engagement requires an

approach that goes beyond quantifying the time spent on social media or the number of online connections. It involves fostering critical thinking and digital literacy skills to help adolescents discern the quality of their online relationships, understand the impact of these interactions on their well-being, and make informed choices about their social media use (Greenhow & Lewin, 2019:4). This includes teaching them how to establish and maintain healthy boundaries, recognise and respond to negative online behaviours, and seek out positive, meaningful connections (Greenhow & Lewin, 2019:3,4).

In conclusion, it is crucial for parents, caregivers, educators, and mental health professionals to play an active role in supporting adolescents in navigating their online worlds. This can be achieved through open conversations about the benefits and risks of social media, providing guidance on managing online relationships, and encouraging activities that promote real-life connections and well-being.

2.7 PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Prevention and intervention strategies for managing social media use among adolescents are crucial to mitigate potential negative effects while enhancing the positive aspects of digital engagement. Several strategies are described in the literature.

- **Educational programmes**

Educational programmes aimed at adolescents, parents, and educators can increase awareness about the potential risks and benefits associated with social media use. Providing adolescents with the skills to critically evaluate digital content and understand the impact of their online behaviour is essential (Bozzola, Spina, Agostiniani, Barni, Russo, Scarpato, Di Mauro, Di Stefano, Caruso, Corsello & Staiano, 2022:24-25). By fostering digital literacy, such programmes can empower young users to navigate social media platforms more safely and responsibly (Bozzola et al., 2022:24). These programmes encompass a broad range of topics, including privacy management, understanding digital footprints, and recognising online misinformation. By addressing these areas, digital literacy initiatives can significantly contribute to safer and more informed online behaviours among adolescents (Burén & Lunde, 2018:211). Critical evaluation skills are essential for adolescents to distinguish between credible and misleading information online. Programmes that

emphasise these skills can help mitigate the effects of exposure to harmful content, including misinformation and cyberbullying (Bozzola et al., 2022:3; Valkenburg et al., 2022:2-3). Educating adolescents about the potential long-term implications of their online behaviour is crucial. Awareness programmes can address topics such as digital footprints, privacy concerns, and the emotional impact of social media, guiding adolescents towards more mindful online interactions (Kaseeska, Gorzkowski, Klein & Health, 2014:4; Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:03).

Privacy management is a critical component of digital literacy, teaching adolescents how to control their online presence and protect personal information (Ellaway, Coral, Topps & Topps, 2015:844). Effective privacy management skills can help prevent identity theft, cyberbullying, and unwanted online exposure. Ellaway et al. (2015:844) emphasise the importance of understanding privacy settings on social media platforms and the implications of sharing information online. Digital footprints, the trail of data that users leave online, are permanent and can have long-term implications. Digital literacy programmes should educate adolescents about how their online actions can impact future opportunities, such as college admissions and employment. Awareness of digital footprints can encourage more thoughtful and cautious online behaviour (Ellaway et al., 2015:847).

As discussed above, parents and educators play a vital role in reinforcing the principles of safe and responsible social media use. Training and resources for these stakeholders can enhance their ability to support adolescents in navigating the digital landscape effectively (Koning et al., 2018:624-625; West et al., 2023:3). The success of education and awareness programmes relies on collaborative efforts among schools, families, and community organisations. These partnerships can ensure that a consistent message is delivered across various environments, further reinforcing the importance of healthy social media habits (Ivie, Pettitt, Moses & Allen, 2020:165; West et al., 2023:3).

School-based programmes provide a vital platform for addressing the complexities of adolescent social media use through a focus on social and emotional learning (SEL), cyberbullying prevention, and stress management. These initiatives offer structured environments where students can acquire and practice healthy online behaviours, fostering a safe and supportive digital experience. Social and Emotional Learning

(SEL) programmes in schools aim to develop students' skills in understanding and managing emotions, understanding and displaying empathy for others, setting and achieving positive goals, making responsible decisions, and forming and maintaining positive relationships. Integrating SEL with digital literacy can help students apply these competencies in online contexts, enhancing their ability to navigate social media with empathy, respect and mindfulness (Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:03).

- **Cyberbullying prevention programmes**

Cyberbullying prevention programmes are crucial in educating adolescents about the impact of online harassment and providing them with strategies to protect themselves and others from harm. These programmes often include components on recognising cyberbullying behaviour, understanding the consequences of such actions, and promoting positive communication online. By fostering a culture of kindness and respect, schools can help mitigate the risks associated with cyberbullying (Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:06).

The constant connectivity and social comparison on social media platforms can lead to increased stress and anxiety among adolescents (Keles et al., 2020:80). School-based programmes that address stress management related to social media use can teach students techniques for managing their online time, coping with negative online experiences, and maintaining a healthy balance between digital and real-life interactions. These initiatives can empower students to make informed decisions about their social media use, contributing to their overall well-being (Keles et al, 2020:80; Marciano & Viswanath, 2023:03)

Implementing these comprehensive programmes within schools can significantly impact students' ability to engage with social media in a healthy, informed, and respectful manner. By addressing the social, emotional and psychological facets of online interaction, schools can equip students with the tools they need to thrive in both digital and physical spaces.

- **Monitoring and managing adolescent social media use**

The integration of technology in managing adolescent social media use offers innovative ways to monitor and guide online behaviour. Technological solutions such as applications that track screen time, filter content, and provide insights into digital habits can play a significant role in promoting healthier online engagement. However,

it is crucial that these tools are used to support, not substitute, the foundational elements of open communication and education about digital well-being (Scott et al., 2019:2).

Applications that monitor screen time can provide valuable data on how much time adolescents spend on social media platforms, allowing for a more informed approach to managing online activities. These tools can help identify patterns of excessive use, potentially prompting discussions about setting reasonable limits and finding a balanced approach to online and offline activities (Valkenburg et al., 2022:4).

Content filters are another technological intervention that can safeguard adolescents from harmful or inappropriate online content. By restricting access to certain websites or types of content, these tools can help create a safer online environment for young users. However, it is essential that these filters are used as part of a broader strategy that includes educating adolescents about the reasons behind such restrictions and fostering an understanding of safe online practices (West et al., 2023:3).

While these technological interventions can be effective, they should be viewed as complementary to the critical components of education and open communication. Engaging in discussions about the responsible use of social media, the challenges of digital life, and the importance of maintaining a healthy online/offline balance is paramount. Such conversations can reinforce the lessons learned through educational programmes and ensure that technological tools are used wisely and effectively (Valkenburg et al., 2022:4-5).

- **Early intervention programmes for vulnerable adolescents**

Targeted interventions for adolescents who exhibit signs of excessive or problematic social media use are crucial for addressing and mitigating the potential negative impacts on their mental health and well-being. Adolescents facing challenges such as low self-esteem, peer pressure, or other underlying issues may benefit significantly from interventions designed to address these specific concerns. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches have been adapted to tackle these digital-age challenges, offering promising avenues for intervention (Patton et al., 2016:39).

CBT is a widely used therapeutic approach intended to help individuals to identify negative thought patterns and behaviours, challenge them, and replace them with

healthier ones (Hetrick et al., 2016:3). When adapted to address issues related to social media use, CBT can help adolescents understand the impact of their online behaviours on their mental health and develop strategies for healthier engagement with digital platforms. This could include setting realistic expectations for online interactions, reducing time spent on social media, and learning to respond to peer pressure in more constructive ways (Ivie et al., 2020:166).

Many adolescents who struggle with problematic social media use may do so as a response to underlying issues such as low self-esteem or a need for social validation (Allen et al., 2014:19). Targeted interventions can help address these root causes, offering strategies for building self-confidence and self-worth independent of online feedback or peer approval. By focusing on these underlying issues, interventions can provide more sustainable solutions to problematic social media use (Ivie et al., 2020:164).

The digital age presents unique challenges for adolescents, including the pressure to maintain a certain image online, cyberbullying, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) (Marciano et al., 2021:3). Therapeutic approaches tailored to the digital context can equip adolescents with the skills needed to navigate these challenges more effectively. This includes developing a critical perspective towards social media, understanding the curated nature of online content, and finding balance between online and offline life (Ivie et al., 2020:172).

In conclusion, education and awareness programmes serve as a foundational pillar in the prevention and intervention strategies regarding adolescent social media use. By fostering digital literacy, critical thinking, and an understanding of the online impact, these initiatives can significantly contribute to healthier digital engagement among adolescents.

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter reviewed existing literature on adolescents and their use of social media. Chapter 3 will focus on the research methods employed in the study, along with the ethical considerations that were observed. It will also present the research findings and provide an interpretation of the results.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This research study was conducted with the goal of exploring and describing young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence, in a case study in Pretoria, Gauteng. The following objectives were the focus of this study:

- To theoretically conceptualise social media and to contextualise it within the South African context.
- To explore and describe participants' use of social media during their adolescent years.
- To explore and describe the participants' perceptions of positive and negative influences of social media use on them during adolescence.
- To obtain suggestions from the participants on promoting optimal use of social media by adolescents.
- To obtain the participants' suggestions for curbing harmful effects of social media on adolescents.

The aim of this chapter is to describe the research methodology employed in this study. It begins with an explanation of the methodology, followed by an overview of the ethical considerations observed during the research, and concludes with a presentation of the findings.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section will elaborate on the various elements underlying the research methodology followed, including the research approach, the type of research, the research design, and the specific research methods employed.

3.2.1 Research approach

An interpretivist paradigm informed the study, focusing on participants' subjective social constructs related to social media use rather than an objective interpretation by the researcher (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). This paradigm aligned well with the study's objective of uncovering the meaning individuals draw from their day-to-day experiences of social media as adolescents from a young adults' perspective (Alhojailan, 2012:8; Fouché & Delport, 2011:65).

A qualitative research approach was implemented to gather in-depth information on the real world perspectives from participants concerning their social media usage during their adolescent development phase (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2017:par 1). This method allowed for a rich, detailed exploration of the topic in the participants' own words (Fouché & Delport, 2011:66; Tenny et al, 2017:par 1). Collecting comprehensive data was crucial for understanding the importance of social media use amongst adolescents (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:53).

The qualitative approach facilitated the exploration of the participants' viewpoints and experiences of social media use during adolescence (Alhojailan, 2012:8; Niewenhuis, 2016a: 2053). It enabled the analyses of the online behaviour and experiences of the research participants, including its social, cultural, physiological, moral, and psychological dimensions (Salkind, 2014:75). Given that the study aimed to conceptualise adolescents' social media experiences in South Africa, it was aligned with an ecosystemic theoretical framework for the study, aiding in understanding the role of the virtual world on differing aspects of the participants' lives (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:54), as described by Johnson and Puplampu (2008:5) in terms of the ecological techno-subsystem.

3.2.2 Type of research

Applied research was viewed to be the most fitting type of research for this study as the research findings could be valuable for practice interventions related to adolescents' experiences with social media (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:94). Applied research typically focuses on addressing practical, real-world problems rather than tackling unanswered questions about the universe or society. The purpose of applied research is to provide solutions to specific challenges faced by individuals or organisations, employing robust evidence and critical thinking in the process (Baimyrzaeva, 2018:6).

Given that this study addressed online experiences of adolescents, the findings of the study have the potential to guide professionals and practitioners in generating programmes that could aid parents, professionals, and adolescents in understanding the virtual world that adolescents engage with, as well as its potential effects on their development (Salkind, 2014:77). The outcomes of the study could enhance an understanding of adolescents' engagement with social media, which might lay the

groundwork for preventive and early intervention strategies to address the negative repercussions of social media usage. Therefore, the research was categorised as applied research with a focus on bringing about social change and addressing social issues (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:94-95; Jansen, 2016:9; Kumar, 2011:30).

Regarding the objectives of the study, the study was both exploratory and descriptive in nature. The exploratory aspect of this study was relevant as it strived to suggest new perspectives and deepen the comprehension of the subject under scrutiny. On the other hand, the descriptive aspect was important for providing an accurate description of the use of social media amongst a sample of adolescents from an eco-systemic view (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95-96).

3.2.3 Research design

The study adopted a case study design, well-suited for exploring the meanings participants ascribe to their lived experiences from an eco-systemic perspective. This design emphasizes an in-depth examination of a current issue within its real-world context, particularly when the boundaries between the issue and its context are not clearly defined. This method enables researchers to develop a thorough understanding of the phenomenon within its natural environment (Yin, 2009:18). Yin (2009 in Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:81) defines case study research as an "empirical inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context."

This design was fitting for the study's objective to explore participants' interpretations of their social media use during adolescence (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:320). Creswell describes a case study as a "strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2013:97). Given that social media use in adolescence is a current concern with everchanging advantages and disadvantages, the case study design was suitable since it gave the researcher insight into their real-life context (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5).

The choice of an instrumental case study design was appropriate, as it corresponds with research directed at understanding a particular societal problem (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:322). Instrumental case studies are intended to offer insights into an issue or to refine a theory (Lucas, Fleming & Bhosale, 2018:216). Therefore, the choice of an instrumental case study design was well-aligned with the research goal,

as the study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of social media use, especially considering its potential effects on adolescents (Creswell, 2013:100).

3.2.4 Research methods

The research methods implemented in this study will be discussed in terms of the study population and sampling, data collection and analysis, and strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings.

3.2.4.1 Study population, sample, and sampling methods

The study population, which is defined as individuals who have certain characteristics (Strydom, 2011a:223; Wagner et al., 2012:272), consisted of young adults aged between the ages of 19 and 25 who had experience using social media during their adolescence in South Africa. This age group was selected because their maturity might enable greater objective and insightful reflections on their perceptions of social media use during their adolescent years. The study population thus included persons who were more likely to provide information that would be relevant to the study (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2012:126; Creswell & Creswell, 2017:142).

The target population, which refers to the focus area for participant recruitment (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013:164; Kumar, 2011:231), was Pretoria East, located in the Gauteng province of South Africa, which holds a large and diverse population. From this population, purposive sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants who met specific sampling criteria (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009:170). Purposive sampling is a qualitative research strategy where participants are selected based on their potential to provide deep insights relevant to the study's objectives, rather than aiming for a wide breadth of data. This method involved choosing individuals or cases that were expected to provide the most pertinent and useful information, ensuring the efficient use of limited research resources. Sampling thus allowed the researcher to deliberately target specific cases or people who held key perspectives on the research question, allowing for a more focused and relevant data collection (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, Bywaters & Walker, 2020:654-655). This method allowed for the selection of individuals who could provide rich, relevant data, thus ensuring the study's objectives were met (Flick, 2018:80; Trochim & Donnelly, 2006:486).

With the use of purposive sampling (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198), participants who complied with the following inclusion criteria were recruited for this study:

- The participants should be males or females between the ages of 19 and 25 years.
- Participants have utilised social media and specifically SNS during their adolescent years (ages 11 to 18).
- Participants should be able to converse in English.
- Participants should not be from the researcher's personal social network or caseload as a social worker.

The researcher had no way of determining which individuals in the target population used SNS during their adolescence; therefore, snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was also utilised (Strydom & Delport, 2011:393). Snowball sampling is a sampling technique where initial participants are asked to recommend other potential participants who have similar characteristics or experiences relevant to the sampling criteria for the research study (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017:2).

Initial participants were identified by telephonically contacting pastors and congregation members in churches such as CRC and Moreleta Church, asking for participant suggestions based on the sampling criteria. The first two participants who were recruited were requested to identify other potential participants who complied with the sampling criteria (Welman et al., 2012:69). Only those persons who indicated their willingness to participate in the study were subsequently contacted by the researcher. These prospective participants were then informed about the study's purpose and benefits, and this process was repeated until the study included the planned number of ten research participants (Strydom & Delport, 2011:393). Participants were not selected from the researcher's personal or professional environment or social work caseload. The anticipated sample size was 10 participants, which was found to be a sufficient sample size for achieving data saturation (Clarke et al., 2015:229).

The use of snowball sampling allowed for the collection of rich, in-depth data from specific populations that might be hard to access otherwise. Notably, this approach facilitated better communication between the researcher and participants, as they were connected through their acquaintances, enhancing the trust and reliability of the data collected (Naderifar et al., 2017:2). Due to the absence of a defined sampling

frame, snowball sampling was deemed an appropriate method for identifying potential participants (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198; Strydom & Delport, 2011:393).

A downside of snowball sampling was the risk of obtaining biased information as the study population depended on the referrals from initial participants, who might all belong to the same social network group (Kumar, 2011:190; Naderifar, 2017:2). To mitigate this issue, the researcher limited the number of referrals received from each participant to a maximum of two to ensure more diversity by including participants from different social networks.

3.2.4.2 Data collection

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were employed to explore the research participants' viewpoints about their social media use during their adolescent years. Semi-structured interviews are extensively utilised in the social sciences, acting as a balanced approach between structured and open-ended questioning (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi & Syam, 2022:22). This data collection method is regarded as helpful for gaining detailed information about research participants' perspectives on a specific topic (Greeff, 2011:351-352). Semi-structured interviews operate as a foundational guide that focuses on a central topic, offering a general pattern for the dialogue, and are particularly valued for their exploratory nature, allowing researchers to delve deeper into the research topic as the conversation progresses, thus facilitating the discovery of nuanced insights and information beyond the predefined questions (Ruslin et al., 2022:22). The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (see Appendix A).

This data collection method was particularly suitable for this study because it enabled an in-depth exploration of the participants' reflections on their experiences of social media as adolescents. An advantage of this interview type was its flexibility; the semi-structured questions in the interview schedule were open-ended encouraging guidance to the participant by the researcher rather than dictating the course of the discussion (Greeff, 2011:352; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93; Ruslin et al., 2022:22, 26). However, the researcher was aware of potential disadvantages associated with semi-structured interviews. For example, the flexibility inherent in this type of interview could lead the discussion away from the topic and ultimately capture insignificant information unrelated to the research topic (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93). To counter this, the

researcher actively guided the conversation to stay focused on the subject matter. To ensure data accuracy, digital audio recordings of the interviews were made with the participants' permission. Supplementary field notes were also taken to enhance the richness of the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:94).

The duration of the interviews was anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. This format and time allowed for additional probing and clarification, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the participant's perspectives. The interviews were conducted in English, but where participants verbalised some of their responses in Afrikaans, it was translated and transcribed into English. Considering the participants as the experts on the subject matter enriched the data collection process (Greeff, 2011:352; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93).

3.2.4.3 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the interview schedule (Fouché & Delport, 2011:75; Strydom, 2011b:237). A single interview was carried out with an individual who met the study's inclusion criteria (Strydom, 2011b:237). It provided an opportunity to identify ambiguities or difficulties in the questions that could hinder the clarity of the responses (Strydom, 2011b:237). Additionally, the pilot test offered feedback about the practical aspects of administering the interview, such as the duration of the interview and the participants' comfort level with the questions (Fouché & Delport, 2011:75; Strydom & Delport, 2011:394-395). Moreover, conducting a pilot study facilitated the early identification of logistical issues, such as technical challenges with audio recording or note-taking, which could be corrected before the rest of the data was a gathered (Fouché & Delport, 2011:75). Given that the data collected during the pilot interview were considered useful, it was incorporated into the final research findings.

3.2.4.4 Data analysis

A thematic approach was used for analysing the data collected during the interviews with the participants. Thematic analysis is a data analysis method ideal for studies aimed at drawing insights through interpretation as it incorporates a systematic approach to analysing data, enabling researchers to link the frequency of themes to the entire content (Alhojailan, 2012:40). This method not only adds precision and depth to the analysis but also significantly enhances the overall understanding and

meaning of the research, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the data (Alhojailan, 2012:40). The phases in thematic analysis as described by Clarke et al. (2015:230) were followed in analysing the research data.

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation**

During the initial phase, the researcher became acquainted with the collected data by transcribing digital audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews and integrating details from the written field notes (Alhojailan, 2012:40). The entire dataset was then reviewed multiple times, approaching it with an inquisitive and open mindset, with the purpose of identifying key concepts and themes as well as possible underlying meanings within the data (Clarke et al., 2015:231-232; Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:409).

- **Phase 2: Coding**

ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative data management tool (License Key: R-AE7-63A-259-E30-604-F52 • License ID: L-030-3FF), was employed to facilitate the coding of transcripts. The researcher started by importing all the documents into the software, where each transcript was categorised as a primary document within the “designated project” in the ATLAS.ti programme. The researcher then developed codes based on recurring themes or topics that emerged during a thorough review of the transcripts. As the researcher read through each transcript, she applied these codes to relevant sections, which allowed for a systematic organisation and comprehensive analysis of the data.

ATLAS.ti’s features enabled efficient navigation between coded segments, making it easier to identify patterns and insights across the transcripts. This phase of the process, known as open coding, involved identifying distinct units in the data that could be linked or compared to uncover commonalities or discrepancies in participants’ responses (Clarke et al., 2015:235; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:116). The researcher focused on recognising meaningful units or concepts and labelled them with descriptive words or symbols that were pertinent to the research question (Clarke et al., 2015:234; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:116; Schurink et al., 2011:410). These units of information, essential for answering the research question, were coded with words or short phrases. This initial coding phase aimed to distil the data into manageable themes or

units, maintaining the flexibility to refine labels or codes as the analysis progressed (Schurink et al., 2011:410).

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Following the coding process, themes and sub-themes were generated by grouping similar codes together with the aim of evaluating the data for its relevance for answering the research question (Clarke et al., 2015:236; Schurink et al., 2011:415). By means of compiling the coded data in a table format, a thematic map was constructed to visually represent potential themes and sub-themes. This process aided the researcher in identifying overarching themes and sub-themes in a structured manner (Clarke et al., 2015:238). Additionally, the researcher formulated definitions or names for each category or sub-category to be clear about the focus of each in preparation for presenting the study's findings (Clarke et al., 2015:238; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:120).

- **Phase 4: Reviewing themes**

This phase involved that the researcher reviewed the themes and sub-themes through a critical lens, questioning their relevance to the research question and their accuracy in depicting the participants' perceptions (Clarke et al., 2015:238; Schurink et al., 2011:415). This allowed the researcher to "step back" and identify connections between different data categories to make sense of the collected information (Schurink et al., 2011:416). The evaluation process involved scrutinizing individual themes and patterns in the data for their relevance to answering the research question. The researcher could revise and adjust the themes and sub-themes and discard irrelevant sections to ensure the data would be aligned with the study's goal (Clarke et al., 2015:238).

- **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

This phase entails that each theme and sub-theme is defined to sharpen the focus on their respective meanings, aiding in the subsequent interpretation and discussion of the study's results (Clarke et al., 2015:240; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:120). Theme names and a short description of each theme were constructed to introduce the core of each theme. This process is seen as essential for understanding what each theme is about and how the different themes fit together (Clarke et al., 2015:240), and thus for “making sense of your data” (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:120). The data were then interpreted,

incorporating insights from existing literature relevant to the topic to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the data (Schurink et al., 2011:417).

- **Phase 6: Writing-up**

The concluding phase of data analysis involves presenting the research findings in a written research report (Schurink et al., 2011:419). The research report includes verbatim excerpts from the participant interviews to substantiate the findings, which would serve as the foundation for the conclusions drawn in response to the research question (Clarke et al., 2015:230, 241; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:122). As emphasised by Schurink et al. (2011:419), the act of writing itself was a crucial element in grasping the 'story' encapsulated by the data. As an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research approach were followed in this study, it was important that the researcher reflected the views and meanings as presented by the research participants. Schurink et al. (2011:417) emphasise that the data should represent the “point of view of the people being studied.”

3.2.4.5 Data quality

Ensuring data quality or trustworthiness is an essential task of qualitative researchers (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123). In this respect, the elements of trustworthiness, namely credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability, will be discussed.

- **Credibility**

The credibility of the data was enhanced by providing an accurate and authentic account of the research findings, thereby representing the participants' views on the topic. Credibility in research refers to the authenticity and reliability of the data, covering the participants' views as well as the interpretation and representation of these views by the researcher (Cope, 2014:89). The credibility of a study is enhanced when researchers transparently share their experiences and methodologies, and further validate findings through participant verification, ensuring an accurate and faithful depiction of the collected data (Cope, 2014:89).

Bias refers to any systematic error in the collection, analysis, interpretation of the data, and publication that leads to incorrect conclusions. This distortion can arise both intentionally and unintentionally, affecting the credibility of research findings by veering away from the truth (Simundic, 2013:12). In this study, observance for potential biases during data collection, analysis, and interpretation was maintained through the

application of reflective practice and peer debriefing, in addition to managing research risks (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191-192; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123; Schurink et al., 2011:420). During the data collection process, particular attention was paid to researcher reactivity while conducting interviews to prevent the researcher from influencing the participants in presenting their responses (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191). The digital recordings were made in a manner that was as non-intrusive as possible to minimise any bias or influence on the participant responses (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192).

Reflexivity was employed to ensure the researcher's self-awareness about any potential influence on both the collection and interpretation of the data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192). Reflexivity in research involves critically assessing the researcher's own biases and positionality, making assumptions explicit, and actively questioning them. By transparently reflecting on methodologies and interpretations, the aim was to enhance trustworthiness and credibility (Wilson, Janes & Williams, 2022:22). Peer debriefing involved collaborative dialogues related to the study with other professionals and colleagues, which further contributed to reflective practice and added an additional layer of consistency to the research process (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:196, 198; Creswell, 2013:251).

To encourage the credibility of the study, a thorough research design and methods that aligned closely with the research questions and theoretical foundations were employed (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123). Boundaries were set to narrow down the results, ensuring a focused and accurate representation of the research findings. A pilot test was conducted to determine whether relevant data could be collected with the use of the interview schedule, thereby collecting the most relevant and accurate information, and conducting member checks by verifying data collected in interviews by reflecting on it when concluding subsequent interviews with other participants (Schurinck et al., 2013:420; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:124).

- **Dependability**

Dependability is related to the consistency and stability over time of the research findings, as well as the degree to which the data and the processes leading to it are documented, auditable, and can be replicated in future studies (Cope 2014:89; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195; Kumar, 2011:172). To enhance the dependability of the study, the

researcher provided a detailed and comprehensive description of the research process that covers various aspects, including but not limited to the research design, methodologies, and tools employed (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:124). Such thorough documentation aimed to allow other researchers the possibility to replicate the study, thereby adding another layer of dependability (Kumar, 2011:172).

- **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings in qualitative studies can be applied to other contexts or settings (Cope 2014:89; Lincoln & Guba, 1985:316). Achieving transferability is often filled with challenges, particularly in qualitative studies (Schurink et al., 2011:420). Despite these challenges, efforts were utilised to support the study's transferability. A comprehensive description of the research methodology and findings was included. This was intended to offer other researchers enough contextual information to evaluate the potential relevance of the study's findings to their specific settings or similar research fields (Geertz, 1973:10; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195).

However, the primary goal was not merely to describe the study itself but to enrich a wider knowledge base applicable across diverse contexts beyond the initial investigation (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195; Schurink et al., 2011:420). In doing so, the study aimed to serve as a resource for future researchers and practitioners interested in related topics.

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the study's findings could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers. It emphasises the importance of demonstrating that the data are not merely figments of the researcher's imagination but are clearly derived from the tangible data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:197). By implementing these measures, the researcher aimed to ensure that the research findings were confirmable, thereby enhancing the integrity and applicability of the research.

In this study, confirmability was enhanced through several strategies. Peer debriefing was utilised as a means of ensuring objectivity, whereby discussions of the research decisions with other professionals and colleagues took place (Lietz & Zayas,

2010:197; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123). This process of external validation ensured that the findings were not simply a result of the researcher's subjective interpretations.

Another strategy for ensuring confirmability was through reflexivity. Reflexivity can be defined as the critical self-examination of the researcher's role and impact on the study, addressing biases and assumptions to enhance credibility and validity (Hsiung, 2010:1; Pillow, 2003:178). Throughout the study, the researcher remained aware of her own influence on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123; Schurink et al., 2011:421).

To further validate the findings, the research findings included verbatim quotes from participants. These quotes provided comprehensive descriptions by the participants allowing for a rich, contextual understanding of the data (Cresswell, 2013:252). The inclusion of direct quotes supported the credibility of the research findings by disclosing the voices of the participants themselves.

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STUDY

Strydom (2011c:114) emphasises the importance of ethical conduct by researchers which relates to their responsibility towards the well-being of the research participants as well as towards accurately reporting the research findings. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria (refer Appendix B). The ethical principles upheld in the study are discussed in this section.

- **Avoidance of harm**

The researcher prioritised the avoidance of harm to participants by implementing several measures suggested by authors such as Babbie (2017:63), Welman et al. (2012:181), Cookingham and Ryan (2015:2), Hawk et al. (2019:65) and Strydom (2011c:115). Firstly, during the recruitment process, the researcher provided comprehensive information to each participant regarding the study's objectives, duration, nature, and potential risks, aligning with best practices outlined in Babbie (2017:63) and Strydom (2011c:115). This ensured that participants fully understood the implications of their involvement and could make informed decisions about participation, consistent with ethical guidelines. Moreover, participants were explicitly informed of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences for them (Babbie, 2017:63; Strydom, 2011c:115).

This measure safeguarded participants against potential coercion and empowered them to prioritise their well-being. Given the potential emotional distress associated with discussing negative experiences related to social media use, particularly during semi-structured interviews, the researcher remained vigilant for signs of discomfort (Babbie, 2017:66; McLaughlin, 2014:65). This sensitivity to participants' emotional states helped mitigate any adverse effects of participation.

Furthermore, in anticipation of emotional distress, the researcher established a protocol for referring participants to counselling services if needed. This proactive approach, supported by the arrangement with a clinical psychologist in private practice, ensured that participants had access to necessary support (Strydom, 2011c:115). Overall, by adhering to these ethical principles and implementing appropriate safeguards, the researcher effectively minimised the risk of harm to participants throughout the study.

- **Voluntary participation**

In ensuring voluntary participation, a letter of informed consent to be signed by participants was constructed, which served as a tool for transparency and accountability (Cope, 2014:89). This letter (refer Appendix C) contained detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, mirroring best practices outlined in Welman et al. (2012:181). By comprehensively outlining the implications of participation, including the right to withdraw at any time, participants were empowered to make informed decisions about their involvement. Moreover, the informed consent document addressed crucial aspects such as confidentiality and data storage, in accordance with ethical standards and recommendations (Manti & Licari, 2018:146; Strydom, 2011c:116-117). Additionally, the researcher sought explicit permission from participants for the digital audio recording of interviews and the dissemination of study results (Strydom, 2011c:116-117; Welman et al., 2012:181). This ensured transparency regarding the use of data and findings, further enhancing participants' trust in the research process.

Overall, by outlining these procedures in the informed consent letter, the researcher upheld principles of voluntary participation, transparency, and respect for participants' autonomy, thereby fostering an ethical research environment conducive to meaningful engagement and collaboration (Manti & Licari, 2018:145).

- **Privacy and confidentiality**

To ensure that participants' privacy rights were respected, the researcher implemented strategies aimed at giving participants control over the information they shared (Strydom, 2011c:119). This approach acknowledged the importance of autonomy in research participation, recognising that individuals should have the freedom to disclose personal details based on their comfort level. In terms of confidentiality, the researcher adopted several measures outlined by ethical guidelines (Strydom, 2011c:119-121). By clarifying in the letter of informed consent how their information would be handled and protected, participants were reassured of the researcher's commitment to safeguarding their privacy and confidentiality throughout the study (Strydom, 2011c:116-117; Welman et al., 2012:181). Another measure involved assigning pseudonyms to participants to avoid the risk of them being identified when presenting the research findings, thereby anonymising their identities and protecting their privacy. Additionally, strict protocols were established for the secure storage of all research-related documents, including informed consent forms and interview transcripts. These protocols were designed to ensure that participants' sensitive information remained confidential both during and after the research process, aligning with the standards set by the University of Pretoria. Participants were assured that their responses would be accessible only to the researcher, reinforcing the confidentiality of their contributions (Welman et al., 2012:201). Furthermore, participants were informed that any future use of the data for research purposes would also adhere to strict confidentiality guidelines, preserving the integrity of their information.

The confidentiality measures were also verbally communicated to participants before the start of the data collection interviews, where they were provided with clear explanations of how their privacy would be safeguarded throughout the research process. By prioritising privacy and confidentiality, the researcher aimed to build trust and confidence among participants, ultimately enhancing the ethical integrity of the study.

- **Deception of participants**

The researcher implemented measures to ensure transparency and honesty throughout the recruitment process, aligning with ethical guidelines and recommendations (Strydom, 2011c:118-119). By prioritising clear and accurate

communication, the researcher aimed to prevent any form of deception or misinformation that could potentially impact participants' understanding and decision-making. To achieve this, comprehensive information about the study, including its purpose, procedures, and potential risks, was provided to the participants in line with research ethical principles (Welman et al., 2012:181). This transparent approach aimed to empower participants to make informed decisions about their involvement based on a thorough understanding of the research.

Furthermore, the researcher remained vigilant to any unintended misunderstandings or misconceptions that might occur in the recruitment of research participants (Strydom, 2011c:119). In the event of such occurrences, the researcher promptly addressed them, clarifying any points of confusion and ensuring that participants had a clear and accurate understanding of the study. By prioritising transparency and honesty from the outset, the researcher fostered an environment of trust and respect, essential for ethical research conduct. This commitment to ethical principles upheld the rights and well-being of participants and also contributed to the integrity and credibility of the research process (Cope, 2014:89); ensuring that participants were treated with integrity and respect throughout their involvement in the study.

- **Debriefing of participants**

In implementing debriefing, the researcher adopted a proactive approach to ensure that participants had the opportunity to reflect on their experience and provide feedback immediately after completion of the semi-structured interviews. This approach aligns with recommendations by Strydom (2011c:122), emphasising the importance of addressing participants' experiences promptly to mitigate any potential concerns or misunderstandings.

After each interview, the researcher initiated a debriefing discussion with the participant, creating a comfortable and open environment for sharing thoughts and feelings. This allowed participants to express any uncertainties, clarify aspects of the research process, or raise concerns they may have had. By facilitating these discussions in a timely manner, the researcher aimed to ensure that participants felt heard and valued throughout the research process. Furthermore, the researcher remained attentive to the participants' emotional states during the debriefing sessions, again making them aware of the availability of counselling, if needed (Strydom,

2011c:122). This empathetic approach helped to foster trust and rapport between the researcher and participants, enhancing the overall quality of the research experience. Overall, by implementing immediate post-interview debriefing sessions, the researcher demonstrated a commitment to ethical conduct and participant well-being.

- **Actions and competence of the researcher**

In ensuring competence to conduct the study, the researcher pursued various avenues to enhance her knowledge and skills, thereby minimising the risk of harm to participants and maintaining the study's credibility (Welman et al., 2012:182). Firstly, the researcher participated in an advanced research module as part of the MSW Play-based Intervention programme, which provided valuable insights and competencies necessary for conducting the research effectively. Additionally, the researcher undertook a comprehensive literature review on the topic under investigation, as recommended by Strydom (2011c:123) and Welman et al. (2012:182). This review not only deepened the researcher's understanding of the subject matter but also informed the research design and methodology, ensuring a rigorous and informed approach.

Throughout the research process, the researcher received supervision from experienced mentors (Strydom, 2011c:123). This supervision provided guidance and oversight, further enhancing the researcher's competence and ensuring adherence to ethical standards and best practices. Furthermore, as a registered social worker, the researcher conducted the study in accordance with the ethical responsibilities and code of conduct outlined by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). This commitment to professional ethics and standards underscored the researcher's dedication to upholding participant well-being and research integrity.

Finally, the researcher maintained academic integrity by presenting the research findings accurately and honestly, while also acknowledging the contributions of others to prevent plagiarism (Babbie, 2017:72; Strydom, 2011c:123). By adhering to these principles, the researcher demonstrated a commitment to conducting ethical and high-quality research.

- **Publication of findings**

To ensure transparency and accessibility of the research findings, the researcher employed several strategies in compiling the written research report (Bless et al. 2013:36; Strydom 2011c:126).

Firstly, the report was constructed in a comprehensible and accurate manner, catering to a diverse audience while maintaining the integrity of the research findings. By presenting the information clearly and concisely, the researcher aimed to facilitate understanding and interpretation by readers from various backgrounds and expertise levels. Moreover, the researcher committed to openly and honestly reporting the limitations and failures of the study (Babbie, 2017:72; Welman et al., 2012:182). This transparency served to provide a balanced and nuanced portrayal of the research process, acknowledging areas where the study may have fallen short or encountered challenges. Furthermore, the research report would be accessible to the public by being available in the library of the University of Pretoria. This decision not only facilitated dissemination to academic audiences but also promoted transparency and accountability by allowing interested individuals to access and scrutinise the research findings.

By implementing these strategies, the researcher aimed to uphold principles of integrity, transparency, and accountability in presenting the study's findings, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

3.4 EMPERICAL FINDINGS

In this section, the empirical findings of the study will be presented. Section A will contain information on the participants' biographical details, while Section B will focus on the research findings structured according to themes and sub-themes. Adopting an interpretive stance, each sub-theme will include direct quotes from the research participants and a synthesis of relevant literature.

3.4.1 Section A: Demographic profile of participants

The demographic details of the individuals who participated in the data collection interviews are presented in Table 3.1 below.

Table 1: Biographical profile of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race
1	19	Female	White
2	19	Female	White
3	25	Male	Black
4	24	Female	Black
5	23	Female	Black
6	22	Male	White
7	20	Male	White
8	19	Male	White
9	24	Female	Black
10	25	Male	Black

In following the sampling criteria for the study, the 10 participants in the study comprised individuals between the ages of 19 and 25, therefore, in young adulthood, who all used social media during their adolescent years and could converse in English. Five participants were male and five were female. Furthermore, five participants were African and five were white. All the participants have completed Grade 12, with participants 9 and 10 having obtained further career-based diplomas. Although all the participants were recruited from the target population in the Eastern suburbs of Tshwane, Gauteng, many lived in the wider Gauteng province and other provinces such as the Free State and Limpopo during their adolescent years, thus at the time of their social media use relevant to the study.

3.4.2 Section B: Qualitative research findings

This section contains the research findings of the study. The themes and sub-themes derived from the data analysis, are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes in the research findings

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Social media use during adolescence	1.1. The age when social media use began 1.2. Introduction to and purpose for using social media 1.3. Time spent on social media 1.4. Preferred online applications and content
2. Influence of social media use on participants' personal life	2.1. Impact on schoolwork 2.2. Influence on interpersonal relationships 2.3. Influence on the participants' emotional well-being 2.4. Influence on the participants' physical well-being 2.5. Influence on adolescents' self-esteem and self-perception
3. Risks associated with social media use	3.1. The use of 'likes' 3.2. The use of false online profiles 3.3. Cyberbullying on social media 3.4. Exposure to inappropriate online content 3.5. The risk of OCSEA
4. General advantages and disadvantages of social media use	4.1. Advantages of social media use 4.2. Disadvantages of social media use 4.3. Actions taken with regards to exposure of inappropriate online content.
5. Reflections on safety measures for social media use	5.1. Suggestions for parental monitoring and rules 5.2. Empowering adolescents for safe social media practices 5.3. Suggestions for schools, professionals and practitioners

The themes and sub-themes presented in the table above will be discussed next; supported with direct quotes from the data collection interviews as well as information from the literature.

3.4.2.1 Theme 1: Social media use during adolescence

As outlined in the literature review, studies on social media use amongst adolescents are considered an important topic in the field of research. As mentioned earlier, a study conducted in the USA found that 95% of adolescents had a smartphone and 95% engaged on some form of social media platform daily (Hill et al., 2016:2). The social media world is forming a significant part of the adolescents' world (Bányai et al., 2017:1), therefore it is crucial to also explore social media use among South African adolescents. In this theme, the research findings on the participants' patterns of social media use will be discussed.

Sub-theme 1.1: The age when social media use began

Among the participants, the age of initial engagement with social media mostly ranged from 12 to 15 years old. This age range aligns with various literature sources suggesting that the onset of adolescence often coincides with the first exploration of social media platforms (Allen et al., 2014:19; ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). The uniformity in age suggests that regardless of the varying external factors influencing each participant, early adolescence appears to be a pivotal time for initial social media engagement (Livingstone, 2008:79).

> *"I was 12 years old when I first started using social media. It was, I think, Grade 6 when I started using it. Before that, I never even knew what social media is. Yeah, I heard from my friends what it is, and I wanted to try it out."* – Participant 2

> *"I can say round about 15 years old. Yes, 15 or 16 years old."* – Participant 3

> *I think I was in primary school, if not Grade 6, definitely Grade 7. [I was] about 12 or 13 years old."* – Participant 4

> *"I think I was about 15 years old. Yes, about 15 or 16 years old."* – Participant 6

> *"I was 13 or 14 years because my father and mother were very strict about using the social media platforms and being on social media a lot because they were like more on going out and doing sports and stuff like that, so I only started late Grade 7, beginning Grade 8 on social media."* – Participant 8

> *"I was 11 years old when I first, like, started using it or first when I started; got exposed to it a little bit."* – Participant 9

> *"I was approximately 14 years of age, and I was still in primary school. … Everyone just wanted to be a part of this culture and use [social media], this culture and this population of people that are exploring something new and are connecting with different people and expressing themselves."* – Participant 10

The age at which participants started using social media varied between 11 and 16 years. Some, like Participant 8, mentioned the influence of parents in determining when they started engaging on social media, while others were driven by curiosity and peer influence. These factors are also described by Visnjic et al. (2015:64-65).

Participants 1 and 8 elaborated on parental guidance, or a lack thereof, in their early social media experiences. While Participant 1's parents thought it was an appropriate age, they later questioned this decision due to the potential harm that social media holds. Participant 8 mentioned parental restrictions as a reason for his late start in using social media. Parental involvement has been cited as an influential factor in adolescent internet use, with some positive influences associated with parental involvement in their children's online lives (Fardouly, Magson, Johnco, Oar & Rapee, 2018:1457).

- **Sub-theme 1.2: Introduction to and purpose for using social media**

Studies suggest that there are various drivers for adolescents starting to use social media. In contemporary youth culture, social media holds significant ways of influencing their social dynamics, self-expression, and perspectives. Referred to as "digital natives," today's teenagers and young adults live in a digital era, where social media platforms function as virtual hubs for socialising, self-expression, and interpersonal connections (Allen et al., 2014:19). For this age group, social media transcends mere utility, becoming an essential element of their identity, educational experience, and daily routines (Allen et al., 2014:19; Vanucci et al., 2020:259). The following were motivations for social media use that the participants discussed:

> *"I think moving to Pretoria … when we came here, it was like everyone in Grade 6, everyone had like big phones, flat screen. I was like, 'What?' In Phalaborwa there was nothing like that. You played outside at that age. Then one day I went from school, and I was like, all these people have like these smart phones and everything, I should also get one just to fit into a specific group - then I got a phone … It's strange because in Limpopo you do everything face to face, so we definitely felt some pressure to measure up to the people in the city life … The mindset of that two different*

environments were definitely a challenge for us because you want to adapt to the city lifestyle." – Participant 1

"I heard through my friends what it [social media] is, and I wanted to try it out and so I began at 12 years old." – Participant 2

"I mean, everyone was using Facebook at that time, so I just felt like there was not another alternative to catch up with your friends just to see how the social media works … So, it was just kind of I don't want to miss out." – Participant 4

"Probably from my mother because she used Facebook a lot. And so, I also wanted to use Facebook and whatever." – Participant 6

"Friends wise and family wise, it was a form of communication to me and also for education purposes." – Participant 7

"My brother is ten years older than me, so he knew a lot and he already used social media platforms, so I learned through him." – Participant 8

As evident in the above examples, most of the participants started using social media by following peers or being introduced to it by friends. Adolescence embodies the developmental stage where peer influence and peer approval become especially crucial. During adolescence, peer approval can greatly influence self-esteem and can even affect cognitive and emotional development (Keles et al., 2020:80). Fear of missing out (FOMO) has been directly linked to stress and dissatisfaction among adolescents (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan & Gladwell, 2013:1841). Therefore, in a developmental context, FOMO can be seen as a reflection of the social anxieties that are magnified during adolescence. While FOMO is linked to stress and dissatisfaction, it is important to note that it can also serve as a catalyst for social engagement and cohesion among peers (Przybylski et al., 2013:1841). For instance, FOMO could drive adolescents to engage in group activities, strengthen friendships, and deepen social bonds, which can be beneficial for their emotional and psychological well-being (Alt & Boniel-Nissim, 2018:577). A sense of belonging and community has been associated with increased self-esteem and reduced feelings of loneliness, aligning with developmental theories suggesting that peer approval can positively impact adolescents' self-esteem.

Participant 1's relocation from Limpopo province to Pretoria in Gauteng province highlights the concept of "forced digitalisation" (Van Dijk, 2020:9). Adolescence is a period when individuals are already negotiating complex questions about identity and

self-concept (Arnett, 2015: 112). Adding the element of forced digitalisation to fit in with others could further complicate this developmental stage, as it not only speeds up the confrontation with issues of identity but also introduces the challenges and opportunities of a digital landscape that can have both positive and negative effects on their self-esteem and mental health (George & Odgers, 2015:280). On the positive side, digital platforms enhance social connectivity, allowing adolescents to maintain emotional ties, which can be a source of support (Allen et al., 2014:19). Furthermore, these platforms offer educational benefits, empowering adolescents with diverse skill sets and even providing a stage for social activism (Dieterle et al., 2019:102; Middaugh et al., 2018:131). Yet, there are also considerable downsides. The platforms also expose adolescents to risks such as cyberbullying, which can have severe emotional consequences (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015:14). Additionally, the addictive nature of these platforms can displace important life activities such as participation in face-to-face interactions and physical activities, and the still-developing cognitive capacities of adolescents may not fully grasp the privacy risks involved in sharing personal information online (Andreassen, 2015:175; Livingstone et al., 2017:15). Therefore, while forced digitalisation has the potential to enrich the adolescents' experience, it also introduces significant challenges that need careful navigation (George & Odgers, 2015:281).

Family influences, as described by some participants, are in line with literature that emphasises the crucial role of family in shaping adolescents' online behaviour (Livingstone et al., 2017:15). This influence is especially important during the formative years when behavioural norms and values are still being internalised. The early introduction to social media through family members establishes foundational norms about the 'appropriate' ways to interact in digital spaces (Livingstone et al., 2017:15). Participant 8's learning through an older sibling taps into the idea of vicarious learning, which is a known phenomenon in the developmental psychology literature where behaviour is influenced through observing others, often older role models (Bandura, 2016:23).

The findings in this sub-theme highlight the role of environment and peer pressure in shaping one's attitude toward social media (Lenhart et al., 2015:23; Stieger & Wunderl, 2022:2) and the impact of social circles on the adoption of technology (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015:1431). The findings thereby emphasise the views held in

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in terms of the important influence of the environment on children's growth and development (Berk, 2013:27; Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) in Louw et al., 2014:29).

- **Sub-theme 1.3: Time spent on social media**

Adolescents' increasing reliance on online activities is evident in their daily routines, with varying descriptions of screen time usage reflecting diverse patterns of social media and smartphone engagement (Scott et al., 2019:1). Diverse patterns of social media use were also reflected in the findings of this study. Some participants reported spending an average of 2 to 3 hours per day on social media use; however, this time would increase markedly over weekends and school holidays:

> *"I probably [spent] about 2 to 3 hours a day on social media."* – Participant 6

> *"I think in high school, maybe like 2 to 3 [hours per day]. … as a teenager during the day, not a lot, because I was in school, we would maybe like in our breaks quickly go online, but for most of the day, like between 08:00 to 15:00 because I also practice sports, I wasn't online. But at home I was a lot online and on weekends I found myself probably most of the day online."* – Participant 7

> *"Eight to 10 hours more or less. … at school, I couldn't be on my phone, but like maybe, you know, when I was doing break time, I was always on my phone. … and at home, I was always on my phone. Whether I'm washing dishes, my phone in my pocket … or if I'm just sitting down, I'm on it, you know, talking to friends or just scrolling for social media. So, I spent quite a lot of time plus minus, you know, 10 hours, depending on how occupied my day was."* – Participant 5

> *"I would arrive home [from school] probably about around 15:00, and then I'll sit on my phone until my mom arrives, from what I think, around 18:00. So, from 15:00 to 18:00 is 3 hours and then I will cook for my mom and prepare her food and then maybe around 19:00 to 22:00 again. So, 6 to 7 hours per day. [Around weekends] there are no school, so I would spend the whole day, just sitting and chatting with people … I spent hours and hours."* – Participant 10

> *"[At age] 11 to 13 years old, let's say, I was between 2 and 3 hours [per day active on social media] … and between the ages of 14 and 17 years old, 5 and 6 [hours per day]."* – Participant 8

Some participants reported how extensive daily social media usage, up to 10 hours, influenced by their daily activities and device accessibility during high school hours.

The data highlight the significant role digital devices and social media play in adolescents' lives, shaping their daily routines, social interactions, and potentially their psychological well-being (Marciano et al., 2021:2). The increase in social media use over the adolescent years is in line with current research studies (Scott et al., 2019:1). The findings furthermore provide insight into how screen time varies between school days and weekends, with less usage during school hours but more extensive engagement at home and on weekends. Participant 7 highlighted the role of engagement in sport activities in limiting online time during the day.

An interesting finding was that some participants reported higher daily screen times (approximately 6-10 hours) during early adolescence (ages 12-14), which typically decreased later in their adolescent years:

> *When I was 12 to 13 years old my screen time would probably be like 7 hours a day. ... but from the age of let's say 16 to 19, well now at 3 hours a day I max myself."* – Participant 1

> *"So, 12 to 14 years was definitely 6 to 7 hours a day for seven days a week but 14 to 18 that's definitely max 4 hours a day for seven days a week."* – Participant 4

These findings contradict current research suggesting that mobile phone and social media usage peaks in middle adolescence (ages 15-17) (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019:2; Scott et al., 2019:2) and provide a more nuanced understanding of their screen time habits across different age ranges. This trend suggests a potential shift in priorities or responsibilities influencing screen time behaviour (Marciano et al., 2021:2) and may also imply a maturation process or changes in lifestyle impacting adolescents' screen time habits (LeBourgeois et al., 2017:s93).

Adolescents' increasing reliance on online activities, including their screen time usage, reflects diverse patterns of engagement with social media and smartphones. This behaviour aligns with research indicating that online communication and entertainment play a significant role in adolescents' psychosocial autonomy, crucial for the development of self-identity and maintaining relationships (Marciano et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019:2). The heightened response to rewards during adolescence, driven by neural mechanisms, encourages increased screen time. Furthermore, FOMO is a significant factor influencing adolescents' engagement with digital devices, potentially affecting their cognitive development and sleep quality negatively (Marciano et al.,

2021:2). The challenge of problematic screen time, characterised by symptoms such as mood modification and tolerance, highlights the importance of fostering balanced digital habits among adolescents. Excessive use of digital technology has been linked with a range of mental health issues including depression and anxiety (Keles et al., 2020:82). Overall, the diverse accounts by the participants demonstrate individual variations in screen time habits among adolescents, influenced by factors such as age, lifestyle, access to technology, and personal preferences.

- **Sub-theme 1.4: Preferred online applications and content**

The participants mostly used their mobile phones to access social media platforms during their adolescent years:

> *"For me it was mostly my smartphone and then also a tablet, but mostly a smartphone because you can literally use that anywhere where a tablet or something is a bit larger. So, it's difficult to carry that with you."* – Participant 1
>
> *"For my birthday, I received my very first mini-BlackBerry. … I was so excited about. It was just for games. So, I only had a phone for Snapchat and for playing games."* – Participant 2
>
> *"It's always been a cell phone. Nothing, nothing else."* – Participant 3
>
> *"I was 12 when I got my first phone. I think that's great."* – Participant 7
>
> *"It was my first smart phone."* – Participant 5

Among the 10 participants, smartphones were often their first devices for accessing online platforms, with many receiving their own phone in early adolescence; a finding that compares with the findings of recent studies (Colder Carras, Van Rooij, Van De Mheen, Musci, Xue & Mendelson, 2017; Marciano et al., 2021:4). In the study conducted in Hill et al. (2016:2) found that 95% of teenagers possess a smartphone, which gave them access to social media platforms and mobile applications.

Different preferences in terms of social media platforms and content were found, which were mostly linked with the participants' interests and goals for using social media.

> *"WhatsApp was fine for me. It was a good form of communication ... But Instagram, yes, you can share photos and everything … I realised that this can be a form of communication, and this can be a form of just checking in on each other. … Then I will scroll through TikTok … I don't know those people but the funny videos or everything it makes me feel relaxed. … I go*

for the lighter, funnier entertainment videos like pranks … but also the food videos are quite interesting for me." – Participant 1

"I would use Instagram to go and check on how they [friends and family] are doing. … Sometimes then social media was a bit um lifting my spirit … So, for me I used TikTok just to look at comedy stuff. So, my friend and I usually just if we see a funny video or something … we send it over to each other on WhatsApp … My family is not too big on social media. … but my friends are big on it. … a lot of my best friends moved away. So, then I would use Instagram to go and check on how, how are they doing." – Participant 2

"Mainly it was a reason of getting to socialize with people and to see the lifestyle of the friends or the people that I consider as friends, close family. It was just a matter of joining um for the trends, the fame of that particular age group. … Um, Facebook, WhatsApp." – Participant 3

"Everyone was using Facebook at that time, so I just felt like there was not another alternative to catch up with your friends; just to see how the social media works, because everyone was on Facebook. So, it was just kind of I don't want to miss out. So let me just get on this platform and see what's going on. … voice notes and then just exchanging pictures with your friends, ... pictures that you took maybe in class or even copying homework and you know, you need that picture immediately, they will send it through to WhatsApp." – Participant 4

"I would look at people's pictures and what people wrote. I also wrote my own posts or shared posts." – Participant 5

"So, I started with WhatsApp mostly, … and then later on in high school, we transitioned more to Instagram … and then I started gaming mostly … those typical teenager boys' games and yeah, I mostly played online with my friends and sometime online with people that I don't know." – Participant 7

Other participants emphasised the value of social media use in terms of school and social activities:

"The age of 17 when we started having class groups on WhatsApp." – Participant 6

"In Grade 8 we had a lot of class groups and tennis groups and hockey groups and debating groups, so you need a lot of information coming through WhatsApp. So, it was kind of compulsory to have WhatsApp - so it was normally just for communication purposes." – Participant 8

> *"Facebook, I think the thing I loved most about this was the different groups about different things; that groups for church, you have groups for music where other people share music from other cultures, and you express yourself and learn different things within yourself."* – Participant 10

The participants shared a common interest in social media, which served as a powerful platform for various purposes. For most of them, social media acted as a window into the daily lives of friends and family, enabling them to stay connected even when physical distance separated them. This feature was particularly cherished and is a feature of social media that is generally known to foster a sense of closeness and continuity in interpersonal relationships (Scott et al., 2019:3). Facebook mainly became a medium for the participants for building relationships and fostering connections. This platform allow users to connect with people, engage in conversations, and share his thoughts and feelings with an online audience (Scott et al., 2019:2). In a study by Allen et al. (2014:17), 81% of adolescence reported extensively using Facebook. WhatsApp, cited by nine participants, was commonly introduced during their adolescent years, often serving as a platform for class, peer or group chats related to social and school activities such as education or sport. Instagram is also seen as a popular choice among adolescents (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30), with six participants mentioning its use for various social interactions. Overall, the data indicates that WhatsApp was a key technology for socialising and staying connected during adolescence. This is in line with a study that suggest that 68% of adolescent participants sent 'selfies' [pictures of themselves] on WhatsApp (McLean, Jarman & Rodgers, 2019:514).

Another prevalent theme among the participants was their preference for humorous content. Funny videos and humorous posts were a means to uplift their spirits, especially on challenging days, as they could effectively transform a negative mood into a positive one. Others mentioned their engagement in following trends on social media. These trends encompassed sharing daily experiences, emotions, and thoughts, allowing them to maintain a sense of connectedness with friends and peers. Social media is often used to stay in sync with the latest online happenings and to create a sense of belonging within their digital communities (Inguglia et al., 2015:2).

Despite the competitive and sometimes aggressive environment of online gaming, in line with the norms of the online gaming world, Participant 7 emphasised the positive

aspects, particularly how it brought joy and strengthened relationships that endured even as they moved to different universities, using gaming as a means to stay connected. Even though only two participants in the study mentioned that they participated in online gaming such as Xbox, research suggests that 90% of adolescents in the USA take part in online gaming activities (Gentile et al., 2017:s82). Participant 7 furthermore discussed how their use of platforms evolved, beginning with BBM and WhatsApp and later transitioning to Instagram, Facebook, and Discord. This progression shows a pattern of changing social media behaviours over time (Marwick & Boyd, 2014:1212).

The participants' experiences are supported by findings showing that a significant percentage of adolescents engage on social media sites, with many managing a diverse array of platforms beyond Facebook, such as Twitter and Instagram, forming a comprehensive 'social media portfolio' (Allen et al., 2014:19; Bányai et al., 2017:1; ECPAT INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30; Hill et al., 2016:2). A social media portfolio allows adolescents to manage and navigate their social connections across multiple online platforms (Allen et al., 2014:19; Bányai et al., 2017:1).

3.4.2.2 Theme 2: Influence of social media use on participants' personal life

The research findings indicate that the participants' social media use had an impact on their personal life, including on their schoolwork, personal relationships, emotional/mental and physical well-being, and on their self-esteem and self-perception.

- **Sub-theme 2.1: Impact on schoolwork**

The participants reported different experiences in terms of the impact of social media use on their schoolwork during adolescence. While one participant (Participant 3) indicated that there was no link between his social media use with his schoolwork, saying that "*I haven't really interacted in a sense of schoolwork or refer to it for school purposes*", other participants reported that their social media use had either a positive or negative impact on their schoolwork.

> *"Yes, most definitely because I would rather be on Facebook than opening my books and studying ... So, it kind of sort of [had an impact] because I'll choose not to do my homework and just be on social media. I'll see you [homework] tomorrow morning or I'll just see. But I'll always prioritise social media over homework."* – Participant 4

> *"I would say it helped it a lot because then if you're struggling with homework assignments or something then you can just send a message for help or ask when is this due? If the teacher has important information to share as well on the work or whatever, then it's quick to give that through as soon as possible. So, it gives you more efficiency in your schoolwork*." – Participant 6

> *"I think in a negative way because I would like to scroll on Instagram, and I thought the teacher wouldn't be so mad if I didn't do this homework. Or, I think, in a positive way when I had to get information on [school] projects and get more in depth [information] on learning work and also it had a positive way with my extra classes to do it over Zoom and everything."* – Participant 7

> *"Both positive and negative, because the first part is, I spent most of my time there and then when my parents are like, 'You know you're no longer learning when you're on the phone and you have to study for exams and stuff'. … I'll tell them that I'm still studying while I'm not … That's the negative part and the positive part is after procrastinating when that time arrives, I know there are certain groups [where] I can ask questions."* – Participant 10

Some participants shared that they could prevent their social media use from affecting their schoolwork by managing the time they spent on social media networks:

> *"My well-being in terms of my schoolwork, I think at some point my schoolwork suffered because I was not sleeping at night talking to people ... But overall, I managed to pick myself up and remind myself that I'm still a learner."* – Participant 5

> *"I would always balance my schoolwork as well as the social media ... I scheduled how to use my phone on a daily basis."* – Participant 9

While Participant 10 explained that he could tell his parents that he spent time doing schoolwork while in fact spending time on social media, it appears that the stricter measures of another participant's parents were more likely to prevent the negative effects of social media use on his schoolwork:

> *"Not that much because I had strict parents ... if they took my phone, I did my homework, I showered, I ate and if I've done everything then I could get my phone back, so they were keeping tabs on my homework and they wanted me to succeed in my academic goal settings."* – Participant 8

The participants reflected a wide range of experiences regarding how social media influenced their academic situation during adolescence. Some expressed positive

sentiments regarding the impact of social media, highlighting its constructive role in their educational journey through accessibility to a wealth of academic information online. School WhatsApp groups were particularly valued for their convenience in facilitating academic-related queries, clarifications, and receiving updates on assignments and tests. Studies show that the active engagement of teachers within these groups was credited for enhancing subject understanding and contributing to improved academic performances (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30).

Conversely, other participants shared a different viewpoint, perceiving social media as a negative influence on their academic lives. They recounted succumbing to online distractions, particularly through social media platforms, leading to procrastination while they should have been focusing on school assignments. Studies found that social media use into the late hours of the night caused sleep deprivation (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2021:1347). A lack of sleep negatively impacts children's school performance by causing tiredness and reduced focus during the day, resulting in increased anxiety and stress, further hindering their academic progress (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30; Visnjic et al., 2015:64-65).

Lastly, Participant 7's use of social media for educational purposes echoes the increasingly blurred lines between education and entertainment in today's digital age, known as "edutainment" (Selwyn, 2016:35). This aspect reflects a growing trend but also presents a developmental challenge, as adolescents must navigate the balance between learning and the distractions that online platforms also offer. The edutainment approach can make learning more engaging and relatable for adolescents, thereby enhancing their educational experience by using platforms that they are already familiar with and enjoy. Adolescents may thus be more inclined to engage with educational content, leading to better retention and comprehension thereof (Wartella et al., 2016:41). Social media platforms can also facilitate collaboration and peer interaction, which are valuable for social learning and academic growth (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015:76).

However, the very features that make social media platforms engaging can also serve as distractions. For example, the constant notifications and the allure of non-educational content can easily sidetrack adolescents from their educational goals (Roberts et al., 2015:47). Furthermore, the educational content available on social

media is not always vetted for accuracy or reliability, presenting the risk that adolescents could assimilate misleading or incorrect information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019:482). The presence of educational content on these platforms might engender a false sense of productivity, leading adolescents to overestimate the educational value of the time they spend online. This false assurance can have consequences on their academic performance and overall cognitive development, as important skills such as deep reading, critical thinking, and sustained attention might be sacrificed (Carr, 2011:116).

With the participants' narratives illustrating both the potential of social media use as an educational tool as well as its capacity to disrupt academic focus and well-being, it is evident that social media use can affect adolescents' functioning in another microsystem, namely the school; highlighting the ecological concept of the mesosystem (Berk, 2013:27-28). It can thus be concluded that responsible and balanced social media usage is crucial for adolescents. Developing effective time management skills and being mindful of the potential pitfalls of excessive screen time can help maximise the benefits while minimising the drawbacks of social media in an academic context.

- **Sub-theme 2.2: Influence on interpersonal relationships**

Social media use can significantly impact adolescents' ability to maintain connections with geographically distant family and friends. Research conducted in the USA found that 95% of teens possess a smartphone, facilitating access to a wide array of social media platforms (Hill et al., 2016:2). This statistic underlines the ubiquity of digital technology in adolescents' lives, serving not just as a means of communication but as a vital connection with others. The use of social media to maintain a connection with family and friends was a central aspect of social media use for most participants in this study.

> *"Whenever my friends ... moved away, I would use Instagram to go and check on how they are doing. It did actually help ... knowing that they are okay. … it's nice having that [referring to WhatsApp] to build a relationship again and make up for lost time."* – Participant 2

> *"You'll be catching up with your long-related cousins especially on Facebook or friends that ... went to the same primary but high school they had to move. But you guys kept in contact, which was always [using]*

> *Facebook and WhatsApp. … [and] to broaden up your social skills*" – Participant 4

> *"WhatsApp really helped us keep in touch ... to let the other people know or give them a sort of sense that the family still matters to them."* – Participant 8

> *"Well, I used it for communication … Also to communicate with my family and friends."* – Participant 9

> *"And in terms of friendships I can say that it exposed me because I was a kind of a reserved child growing up. So, when I got on Facebook … I got a lot of friends and that's the kind of relationships I had."* – Participant 5

Most of the participants in the study expressed the important role that social media played in maintaining connections with family and friends who were geographically distant. Such connections support a stronger mesosystem (Berk, 2013:27-28). These digital platforms served as a tool, allowing them to convey to their loved ones that, despite the geographical separation, their bonds remained significant. Moreover, Participant 5 discovered a sense of belonging within online communities, highlighting how social media can foster a sense of identity and inclusion for those who might have struggled with these aspects in the offline world (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52).

The research findings align with observations that social networking platforms have become a primary mode of communication for many young people, largely replacing traditional methods such as email and instant messaging (Oberts et al., 2017:52; Visnjic et al., 2015:64-65). This aspect reflects the broader trend of social media serving as real-time windows into others' experiences, bridging physical distances and fostering a sense of proximity and intimacy (Visnjic et al., 2015:64-65).

In contrast to the positive experiences of the above participants, Participants 1 and 5 mentioned that that their social media use harmed the quality of both their online and personal relationships.

> *"At that stage, I felt like it was debriefing online, but later on, I realised that influenced my relationship with them because we don't talk about our day. … [And] in a way, when I was much younger, it influenced my relationship with my friends and family in a bad way because we would rather be on social media than to spend time together."* – Participant 1

> *"At that time. I think during that time my relationship with my mother was rocky. I think it's you know because I was a teenager, I was just feeling misunderstood, and you know all of those other feelings that you just feel. And my mom had a problem with me constantly being on my phone like that. So, it badly influenced my relationship with my mother."* – Participant 5

The participants' experiences touch on the potential pitfalls of excessive social media use. Digital preference can lead to a reduction in meaningful offline experiences, highlighting concerns about the quality of social connections fostered through screens (Hawk et al., 2019:71; Kross et al., 2013 in Barth, 2015:203).

On the other hand, Participant 8 shared that the relationships in his family were not affected due to the limits on his social media use imposed by his parents:

> *"If they said, 'Okay, phones down', it was family time. So, there was a separation between screen time and family time in our household."* – Participant 8

This perspective reflects the role of parents or caregivers and the importance of setting rules for Internet use to monitor and guide adolescents' social media use, safeguarding their mental health and well-being (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:4; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018:20-21). The role of parents will be discussed in more detail in Sub-theme 5.1.

- **Sub-theme 2.3: Influence on the participants' emotional well-being**

As also described in the literature review, social media is widely accessible and changed how people connect with others and see themselves. But while social media can be helpful and fun, it can also affect how adolescents feel, which may have a positive or negative effect on their emotions. Some participants expressed positive emotional effects of social media use during their adolescent years; however, most described experiences that were harmful to their emotional well-being.

> *"All the things that just make you become or feel more alive. Those were the emotions attached to social media because it's just one thing that takes you away from a lot of things and just puts you in a happy state most of the time."* – Participant 3

> *"I think the advantage is just to escape from reality and just to not feel what you're feeling and just feel a sense of freedom and relaxation."* – Participant 8

> *"It just creates a lot of insecurities because everyone right now on social media, they have this picture of how perfect their life is and how perfect their bodies and how perfect their skin is, which we know 90% of the time, that's not true."* – Participant 4

> *"When we got online and played together it brought me joy because ... we were committed to win and play as a team and just build our relationships further. [However], you know, kids are very sensitive in high school, so especially the girls, if you really say something bad or bullying, it would hurt their feelings, they would really like cry or something."* – Participant 7

> *"It was sad because I mean I was their friend. Now they have a new friend replaced me."* – Participant 2

The accounts by Participants 8 and 3 of using social media as an escape from reality speaks to the complex role these platforms play in emotional well-being. While offering a sense of freedom and relaxation, over-reliance on social media for emotional escape can exacerbate vulnerabilities to issues like self-esteem and mental well-being, highlighting the importance of balanced social media use (Best et al.,lor, 2014:15; Biernesser et al., 2020:2). Participant 2's experience with losing a friend to someone else on social media shows light on the platform's nature: a community builder that can also alienate individuals, fostering inclusivity while also performs exclusivity. Although social media offers meaningful interaction opportunities, it brings about significant mental health challenges. In addition, improper usage, especially during nighttime, is associated with escalated anxiety, depression, and compromised sleep quality (Keles et al., 2020:80; Woods & Scott, 2016:45).

In conclusion, the above findings align with observations that social media can amplify emotional states, with both positive and negative emotions being transmittable through online interactions and in unique ways that differ from traditional face-to-face interactions (Barth, 2015:201; Kramer et al., 2014 in Hausman et al., 2017:717). These findings also highlight the positive or negative impact that social media use can have on adolescents' mesosystem. Whereas a strong, supportive mesosystem can enhance a person's well-being and negative mesosystem can be harmful to the person (Sekaran, Kamath, Ashok, Kamath, Hegde & Devaramane, 2017:179,178).

- **Sub-theme 2.4: Influence on the participants' physical well-being**

The experiences shared by the participants highlight how social media can influence adolescents' physical well-being. Their accounts reflect experiences mostly linked to

disrupted sleep patterns due to late-night social media use and one participant mentioned the extreme impact of developing an eating disorder influenced by content viewed online.

> *"I only use TikTok for like when I lie in bed at night, and I cannot switch off just to go to sleep."* – Participant 1
>
> *"I sacrificed my sleep a lot, especially back in like high school … I'll sleep through the classes, you know, doze off a little bit."* – Participant 4
>
> *"I was not sleeping at night talking to people."* – Participant 5
>
> *"So, I would use my phone while I they think I was sleeping, or I would tell them lies that I'm using my phone for the internet, I had a school project*." – Participant 9
>
> *"So, after 12 you see movies PG 18. … you wouldn't be able to do that every day because it was school time and whatsoever … So, when I wake up in the morning sometimes you are tired."* – Participant 10
>
> *"It wasn't a good influence on me. I had a whole eating disorder ... I wouldn't eat breakfast or lunch, just dinner because I wanted to look like her [referring to a model on social media]."* – Participant 2
>
> *"With regard to body image, especially in adolescence, because that's the years where you start to form your identity. So, if you are seeing, these male fitness models with six pack abs, muscles, and everything; then you might start to develop a healthy relationship with the gym or you might feel that you are overweight and start to develop an unhealthy relationship with food, which leads to extremely bad consequences in the future."* – Participant 6

Most of the participants described how social media use has negatively impacted their sleep, whether through staying up late scrolling through apps like TikTok or engaging in WhatsApp or social media conversations. This disruption in sleep can have significant ramifications for physical health, including increased risk for obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular problems, as well as for mental health, leading to heightened stress, mood disorders, and cognitive impairments (Woods & Scott, 2016:2). The direct correlation between screen time before bed and reduced sleep quality is well-documented, with the blue light emitted by screens inhibiting the production of melatonin, the hormone responsible for regulating sleep cycles (Chellappa, Steiner, Oelhafen, Lang, Götz, Krebs & Cajochen, 2013:574).

Although Participant 6 referred to positive effects, for example a "healthy relationship with the gym", both Participants 2 and 6 referred to eating disorders developing as a

result of aspiring to emulate figures seen on social media. Their statements reflect a broader trend where constant exposure to idealised body types can cultivate body dissatisfaction, leading to unhealthy behaviours such as restrictive eating (Fardouly et al., 2020:1458). The influence of social media on the development of body image concerns and eating disorders is becoming an area of increasing focus, with studies indicating that social media use may be associated with a heightened risk of these issues (Beyens, Pouwels, van Driel, Keijsers & Valkenburg, 2020:5). The findings underscore the profound impact these platforms can have on body image and eating behaviours and, in addition, on adolescents' self-perception and self-esteem, as will be discussed in the next sub-theme.

- **Sub-theme 2.5: Influence on adolescents' self-esteem and self-perception**

Adolescence is a period of significant transformation, where individuals navigate through various developmental milestones, including the establishment of their identity, which is intricately linked to their self-esteem and self-perception. The fluctuating levels of serotonin and dopamine during adolescence contribute to the emotional instability and behavioural changes observed during this period, significantly impacting adolescents' self-esteem (Sinclair et al. 2014:1584; Wahlstrom et al. 2010:9). Self-esteem and self-perception play critical roles in adolescent development, influencing their emotional, social, and cognitive growth.

The arrival of social media has introduced new dynamics that can influence adolescents' self-perception and self-esteem, offering platforms for self-expression and social connection but also presenting potential risks for body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying, and the creation of unrealistic standards (Burnette et al., 2017:114-115; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3; Glover & Fitch, 2018:174; Kelly et al., 2018:60). While some participants stated that social media use did not influence their self-perception and self-esteem during their adolescent years, others confirmed that it indeed affected how they perceived themselves.

> *"I don't think by then, social media affected how I look at myself. I think I had a pretty good steady mentality of the person that I am. So, social media never affected how I look at [myself]. … [But] comparison is the thief of all joy and once you compare yourself to how a person is living or what they are liked for and whatever, that's a downhill from there because you will start not liking yourself and from you not liking yourself, you might even want to commit suicide."* – Participant 4

> *"Immediately I was like, why do you compare me with that girl? Is my body not [acceptable]? Immediately I feel self-conscious about that."* – Participant 1

> *"You're being purely peer pressured ... Seeing other people on Instagram progressing so far in life at the same age as you."* – Participant 7

> *"So, you always have to up be on the highest platform because the minute you start slacking, it comes with a lot of it's like negative comments and stuff. Like you were there and now just have fallen."* – Participant 3

The participants' comments on the negative impact of social media on adolescents' self-perception and self-esteem align with research findings indicating that social media use can result in negative body image and self-esteem issues due to unrealistic beauty standards (Burnette et al., 2017:114-115; Glover & Fitch, 2018:174). Discomfort and an imbalance between the real self and online personas underscore the pressures adolescents face to conform to idealised behaviours, which may not align with their true selves (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52); an aspect that may even result in suicide, as mentioned by Participant 4.

The development of a healthy self-perception is crucial for psychological well-being and is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors (Erikson 1968:22; Glover & Fitch 2018:172; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011:801). Adolescents are particularly sensitive to their social environments, with peer relationships providing a context for validating or adapting roles and traits deemed socially acceptable (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017:44). However, the influence of family dynamics cannot be overlooked; a supportive family environment enhances positive self-perception, while conflict-ridden or unstable family settings can negatively affect an adolescent's self-concept (Khaleque et al. 2016:669-670; Van Dijk et al. 2014:1862).

The insecurities fostered by the portrayal of idealised standards on social media can lead to negative self-comparisons and poor self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2018:60; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3). The feelings of inadequacy resulting from the immediate comparison with others on social media platforms highlight the need for a critical examination of the content consumed by adolescents (Kelly et al., 2018:60; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The digital age demands a balanced approach to navigating social media, emphasising the importance of fostering healthy self-

esteem and self-perception amidst these challenges (Hill et al., 2016:2; Maher et al., 2014:258).

The above findings point to both positive and negative effects of social media, where positive interactions can enhance self-esteem through connections and validation from peers, yet also lead to feelings of exclusion and inadequacy (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). This highlights the complex role of social media in shaping adolescents' self-perception and social interactions. Social media is associated with characteristics that could present significant risks to its users. This aspect will be discussed in Theme 3 below.

3.4.2.3 Theme 3: Risks associated with social media use

Certain characteristics related to social media use are associated with risks to its users. Subsequently, the impact of social media use on adolescents could encompass a wide array of psychological and emotional consequences, including heightened anxiety and depression, distorted body image perceptions, and exposure to explicit content (Keles et al., 2020:79-80). Some of these risks raised by the participants will be discussed in the following sub-themes.

- **Sub-theme 3.1: The use of 'likes'**

The social landscape of adolescents has been significantly reshaped by the advent of social media, where the pursuit of 'likes' has become an important aspect of their digital interactions. Digital endorsement, symbolised by 'likes' on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, serves as a tangible measure of social validation and acceptance among peers, deeply influencing adolescents' self-esteem and self-perception (Bányai et al., 2017:1; Hill et al., 2016:2). This notion is consistent with the views and experiences of the study's participants. Several participants in the study emphasised the important influence of 'likes' on social media.

> *"I feel like 'likes' on social media get in people's heads. It gets into them thinking that, you know, they they're better than other people just because of social media. You got 400 likes now, you know, you're the big thing."* – Participant 4

> *"I think people want to be defined by their 'likes' ... If I scroll through and I see someone that I know, I would just like the picture and go on ... if you have 200 likes on Instagram, you think you've made it. … friends would post photos of them in a bikini, and they would get hundreds of likes. Then*

> *I would just post a head and shoulder picture of myself and then I would maybe get like 50 likes."* – Participant 1
>
> *"You felt like you were popular, or you felt like people acknowledged you ... But then again, it also made you feel a bit pressured because now you have to maintain this image."* – Participant 3
>
> *"Basically, 'likes' on social media is … almost like a popularity contest where people show you how much they like your content, how funny you are, how relatable you are. I think 'likes' on Facebook are also a way that you know can hurt your confidence. If you are seeking validation, then if you don't get the validation you want, it's not going feel good and will affect you negatively."* – Participant 5
>
> *"I don't agree with the way that it's being done ... it's unnecessary to equate 'likes' to how well liked you are or to attach your value to the number of 'likes'. ... A lot of people do that, and their self-worth is based completely on the amount of 'likes' and comments and shares they get on social media."* – Participant 6

Individuals often seek validation through the number of 'likes' on their social media posts, equating it with popularity or achievement (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3). Adolescents' engagement with social media is heavily influenced by the pursuit of validation and acceptance from their peers. Posting content with the expectation of 'likes', comments, and shares serves as a form of positive reinforcement, encouraging them to continue these behaviours (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175). However, this quest for validation often leads to a pervasive culture of comparison and envy among adolescents. They constantly measure the success of their posts by comparing them to those of their peers and when they perceive that others are garnering more 'likes' and attention, feelings of envy, inadequacy and diminished self-esteem can set in (Kelly et al., 2018:60). If the perceived minimum of 'likes' weren't achieved, one should feel pressured to remove your post due to the embarrassment (Bányai et al. 2017:1). As indicated by the participants, a negative impact on confidence can occur if desired validation is not received (Oberst et al., 2017:52).

The desire for 'likes' on social media can exert immense pressure on adolescents to conform to prevailing trends and behaviours, even if these do not align with their true selves. This conformity can extend to both their online and offline lives, as they feel compelled to fit in with online norms (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). Consequently, the choices they make in terms of online content and interaction may

be influenced by the pursuit of online popularity. The anxiety related to the number of 'likes' a post receives is a significant aspect of adolescent behaviour on social media. A lack of 'likes' can trigger self-doubt and raise questions about self-worth, creating emotional distress. Conversely, a high number of likes can offer a temporary boost to self-esteem, reinforcing the cycle of seeking validation (Visnjic et al., 2015:65).

However, not all the participants perceived 'likes' on social media to be important for their self-perception or well-being:

> *"To be honest it doesn't actually bother me at all. I never even look at the likes."* – Participant 2

> *"The likes do not bother me. That's why I didn't post that much. I don't care if the people like me or not. I don't care if they like my photo or not... the photo is not for them. The photo is for me."* – Participant 8

Participants 2 and 8 appear to have managed what Hawk et al. (2019:65) describe as a healthy detachment from the need for social media validation. Thus, they did not require external validation through what they posted online (Hausmann et al., 2017:715).

As adolescents navigate through this critical developmental stage, the desire of social approval through 'likes' impacts not just their social standing but also their internal sense of worth, creating a complex interplay between digital validation and self-esteem (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). Furthermore, addictive behaviours such as FOMO can manifest when adolescents constantly check for notifications and 'likes', disrupting their daily routines, sleep patterns, and academic performance. This addiction-like behaviour reflects the power of 'likes' as a psychological reward. The reliance on online validation can develop into an unhealthy pattern, potentially hindering their ability to manage emotions and stress through healthier means (Oberts et al., 2017:52).

The digital quest for 'likes' can be either positive or negative. On one side, it fosters a sense of belonging and recognition within peer groups, potentially boosting self-esteem through positive feedback (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175). On the other hand, it may perpetuate a cycle of comparison and competition, leading to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and a distorted sense of reality. This aspect highlights the effect of social media on adolescents' psychological well-being, where the value placed on

'likes' can influence their emotional health and developmental outcomes; indicating the potential harm that the culture of 'likes' can inflict on adolescents (Burnette et al., 2017:114-115; Kelly et al., 2018:60; Maher et al., 2014:258).

- **Sub-theme 3.2: The use of false online profiles**

The participants were aware of the fact that many people would create false online profiles that do not present their real lives and true personal details, mainly with the intention to fit in with positive images they see on social media.

> *"If you use social media, you see a different person on social media than you see in real life. … they would wear a nice dress for the picture and then when it's all posted, they will go back and put on some sweats and t-shirt and a messy bun and that's fine. So, I think social media expects from us to wear a mask in terms of to fit into the different categories that there are. … Just to fit into that category of 'if I post this, I will be part of the cool kids or the popular kids', where I feel like that's not what social media was intended to do. … So, this definitely, I think if you have social media, you already have some sort of mask because you look at the captions that everyone else use and then, 'okay, so this is what mine looks like'. … I think each trend brings its own mask to you because you question your own values just for the friends."* – Participant 1

> *"Social media … kind of removes us from reality. … it's like, you know, social media, we put on a mask and now, it's all consuming. … That can exist as true or false in the sense that, you know, we have people that even go to the lengths of creating fake accounts that they can be able to say stuff and also that they can be able to say things that they are not able to say boldly with everybody seeing them. And people on social media, they want to portray a certain level of lifestyles, a certain level of accomplishment. … for example, they only show the good side of things. They don't show the bad side. They can be pretentious. – Participant 5*

> *"What the people say on social media and who they are in real life can be two different people. … So, the mask part is definitely there because the people want sort of a sense of recognition, and they don't want their real identity to come out because they don't have a lot of self-confidence, or they are ashamed of themselves. So, in a way I can understand why they are hiding behind the mask, but in another way, it's only harming them as a person inside."* – Participant 8

> *"I think it is dangerous because now instead of being you, you are building yourself in a way that you like. … building an image of something you are not. … Now people are busy making images of things that they know they are not."* – Participant 10

The participants' perspectives emphasise the dynamics between social media, the adoption of ‘masks’, and the effects thereof on adolescents. It is evident that social media platforms frequently place individuals under considerable pressure to conform to prevailing trends, norms, and expectations, which can compel them to adopt personas that do not represent their true selves. This conformity, driven by the desire for online validation and acceptance, can lead to a profound sense of inauthenticity, where individuals feel they are presenting a fake persona rather than their genuine selves (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175). As is also evident in the research findings, the need to maintain this fake online persona can create an unhealthy cycle of seeking validation through online metrics, such as ‘likes’ and comments, which can further impact self-esteem and mental health (Oberst et al., 2017:52).

Adolescents may become so engrossed in creating and maintaining their online personas that they prioritise their virtual lives over their real-world experiences. This disconnection signifies changes in interactions between the adolescents’ different microsystems, for example the peer group (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29), and can have far-reaching consequences, affecting their overall well-being and interpersonal relationships (Hausmann et al., 2017:715). Adolescents may miss out on genuine, meaningful interactions with family and friends as they invest significant time and energy into constructing and upholding their digital facades. Furthermore, this prioritisation of online personas can lead to a distorted sense of self-worth and identity. Adolescents may equate their value with their online popularity, often measured in ‘likes’, comments and shares. As a result, their self-esteem becomes intricately tied to their online presence, which can lead to emotional distress and anxiety when their digital personas do not meet their expectations (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30; Kelly et al., 2018:60).

- **Sub-theme 3.3: Cyberbullying on social media**

Cyberbullying occurs through digital devices and platforms and extends the reach of traditional bullying into the virtual spaces where young people spend a significant portion of their time. In terms of the ecological systems theory, it can be concluded that cyberbullying can negatively affect the quality of the adolescent’s interactions within the microsystem of the peer group, thus lowering the quality of the mesosystem (Berk, 2013:27). Cyberbullying can manifest in various forms, including harassment,

defamation, exclusion, and impersonation, leaving lasting effects on the mental health and well-being of its victims (Bass, 2016:24).

> *"It's so prevalent and I think it's one of the negatives about social media because, you know, certain people really do not agree with them on certain things. They will bully you and also, if you are also controversial, you also get bullied quite a lot. Another thing that, you know, sometimes people just dislike you and just trying to bring you down and like I said, people even create fake accounts. … I think it's one of the things that negatively impact the social or emotional well-being of people on social media being bullied."* – Participant 5

> *"I think bullying overall is a big issue in our daily lives, but bullying on social media is much easier than to go to school and to bully someone physically. … it's easy to sit behind the screen and to bully someone constantly where that person, you don't know that person's reaction. Some of the people will be fine with it because, they know themselves, where you can just find that one person that's insecure … they will remember that one comment, it will be in the in the back of their head." – Participant 1*

> *"It affects a person in a negative way, you know, and people don't forget about being bullied because at the end of the day, … most of our insecurities comes from how bullied you were back in primary and in high school. … we've read a lot about it and back then there were kids in certain schools, you know, that wanted to kill themselves because they're being bullied. … It honestly affects one's life in a very bad way once someone gets to experience it. Because there are cases where people have committed suicide because of social media bullying."* – Participant 4

> *"I think it's a big thing, cyberbullying, on social media because like I said, your social media, your profile becomes a part of you, becomes your image on social media, it becomes you."* – Participant 10

The participants' views on cyberbullying indicate the severe threats to mental health posed by online harassment, often resulting in personal embarrassment, damaged relationships, and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Cyberbullying reflects the concerning aspects of online interactions that can undermine adolescents' self-esteem and mental well-being (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801).

Participant 9's journey through cyberbullying illustrates the profound impact of online bullying on mental health:

> *"I was so numb, honestly. I felt like it [exposure to cyberbullying] was the end of the world at that time … I went to my teacher, and then that's when she told me to go to the police station, or they can call the police, and then they can come here and reprimand the learners. I said, no, let me take the action, let me fight for my myself. I'll went to the police station and open the case. When I got there, the constable explained, everything for me, to me that this type of bullying is called cyberbullying. That's when I took the action and opened the case. … They protected me, and they came to my school, and they told the parents of the learners that did that to me, and that's when they stopped doing everything, after helped me a lot. … I went to consult and told the doctor the situation, and then he prescribed me these other drops that I would get at the pharmacy."* – Participant 9

This expression aligns with the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of social media use, emphasising the value of external support and resources (Farré et al., 2020:9; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514). The severity of cyberbullying's consequences, including the potential for leading to tragic outcomes such as suicide, is a stark reminder of the critical need to address and mitigate cyberbullying on social media platforms. The expressions suggest that while reducing online exposure can diminish the risk of cyberbullying, broader, more proactive strategies are essential for creating safer online spaces and promoting responsible digital behaviour among users.

- **Sub-theme 3.4: Exposure to inappropriate online content**

The experiences shared by the participants in the study highlight the complex and often detrimental impact of early exposure to harmful content on social media, including pornography, explicit messages, cyberbullying, and harassment. All the participants in the study reported exposure to harmful content or actions on social media platforms during before the age of 15 years.

> *"In high school we had a case whereby someone's nudes that she sent to a boy in high school, then got leaked … They shamed the girl, and they never shame the guy that he does these things. It's always as a girl. … Your self-worth … back then it can take months of people always reminding you, you go around sending guys pictures of your boobs or pictures of that, and you know that is wrong. So, it carries a lot of shame, which is just not good."* – Participant 4

> *"… sending you those inappropriate pictures or videos. [Also] males, they'd send pictures of their genitals or maybe they'd like post a picture or something like a link of showing somebody maybe, a woman who is naked*

> *or half naked and they'll ask you to send something like that."* – Participant 5

> *"I think the most harmful one would be pornography … And you find yourself being addicted to it and you have more and more groups with more connections … with no one guiding you that this is wrong, or this is right or anything. Just you, your space, and your free time and you're free doing whatever you want, whenever you want and taking whatever you want and damaging your mind and not your parents or your mother, not your father saying this is wrong."* – Participant 10

As evident in the participants' views, exposure to explicit content, particularly at a young age, is linked to various negative experiences. The receipt of unsolicited explicit messages, including images of genitalia, constitutes a form of sexual harassment and can have traumatic effects on adolescents. This form of digital harassment violates personal boundaries and can elicit feelings of violation, fear and powerlessness. For adolescents, who are still developing their understanding of consent and personal boundaries, such experiences can be particularly damaging, impacting their sense of safety and trust in online and offline interactions (Livingstone, 2008:397) The content may instil shame, guilt, and confusion, contributing to a negative self-image (Farré et al., 2020:9).

The accessibility of pornography on social media can profoundly influence teenagers' perceptions of sexuality, intimacy, and gender roles. Adolescents, during a critical period of sexual development, may develop skewed and unrealistic expectations about sex and relationships based on exposure to pornographic content. This misalignment can hinder the formation of healthy, respectful, and consensual relationships, as the portrayal of sexuality in pornography often lacks representations of emotional connection, consent, and realistic sexual experiences (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514). It is important to distinguish between fantasy and reality, as pornography often portrays unrealistic and exaggerated depictions of sex and relationships, which can distort the viewer's perceptions and expectations. This dynamic provides insight into the harmful effects of pornography, including its potential to contribute to distorted views of sex, intimacy, and relationships, as well as its impact on mental health and self-esteem (Farré et al., 2020:2-3), and potentially leading to problematic sexual behaviours and attitudes. Participant 10 reflected that his curiosity gradually transformed into addictive behaviour, and furthermore highlighted

challenges associated with online pornography, which can significantly affect adolescents' self-esteem, relationships, and perceptions of sexuality (Buren & Lunde, 2018:211; Farré et al., 2020: 9; Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514). This aspect highlights the role of social influences in shaping attitudes and behaviours, particularly in adolescence when individuals may seek validation and acceptance from their peers (Gámez-Guadix & De Santisteban, 2018:608). Johnson and Puplampu (2008:5) regard social media as a techno subsystem that forms part of the child's immediate microsystem, which sheds light on the potentially significant influence of social media on adolescents' development.

The widespread exposure to inappropriate online content reflects a critical challenge in the digital age, where the proliferation of explicit material and the potential for harmful interactions can significantly affect adolescents' lives. The reliance on pornography for 'sexual education', particularly among adolescents from cultures where open discussions about sexuality are limited, underscores a significant gap in formal sex education. This gap often leaves young individuals turning to unreliable and unrealistic sources for information about sex and relationships, potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes and expectations (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514). In addition, pornography can be addictive due to its ability to stimulate the brain's reward system through the release of dopamine, like other addictive substances or behaviours (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:511).

Educators, caregivers, and mental health professionals and practitioners play pivotal roles in providing adolescents with the tools to critically assess the content they encounter online and to navigate social media in a safe and responsible manner. Fostering open lines of communication about sexuality and the potential risks associated with social media use is crucial in supporting healthy development, particularly in adolescence or young adulthood when curiosity about sexuality is high (Farré et al., 2020:2).

- **Sub-theme 3.5: The risk of OCSEA**

Two participants mentioned that they experienced online messages of a sexual nature during their adolescent years. Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) encompasses incidents where digital, internet, and communication technologies are utilised at any stage during the process of abuse or exploitation and can manifest

solely in the online realm or through a combination of online and face-to-face interactions between perpetrators and children (ECPAT, INTERPO & UNICEF, 2022:15).

> *"I'll use myself as an example, that I experienced a weird man sending me messages and, also, I know a couple of my friends also experienced the same thing … they'd post a picture or something … and they'll say stuff like 'Let's make phone sex', you know, send multiple messages, say stuff like that. … It was uncomfortable, it scared me, especially because this person doesn't even know me."* – Participant 5

> *"You would find people in those groups that will text you and say, 'Hey, I see you. You are in the same group. You can give me your WhatsApp number, or you can give me this, and then I'll send you other videos'. So, you find yourself interacting with them. … I saw this video on Facebook does this or this guy was doing this to that girl, and then they would be like, 'Hey, I saw it too' and you'd find out, it's not only me, but you're also doing this. So, if you feel more comfortable and say, probably all of us are doing this, there's nothing wrong with me going there, watching pornography and consuming all this content and feeling that it is fine."* – Participant 10

Perpetrators of OCSEA exploit the anonymity and reach of social media, which inflict emotional distress on their targets. Through social networking sites (SNSs), OCSEA may engage children in sexually explicit conversations, explicit images, and interactions within the pornography industry (De La Hoz, 2021:33). Participant 10 explained how an adolescent could easily be trapped in these interactions, and even normalise the content. This dynamic contributes to a long-lasting impact on victims, manifesting as deep emotional scars (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The extensive increase in Internet usage has led to greater risks of exposure to OCSEA. This easily accessible phenomenon is associated with harmful consequences for child victims, including feelings of fear, anxiety, and embarrassment (Schmidt et al., 2020:1), as also evident in the statement by Participant 5.

In response to exposure to OCSEA, one participant chose to remain silent and withdrew from a problematic WhatsApp group where sexual images were being circulated:

> *"We didn't tell our parents what was going on and everything, and then we just left the group."* – Participant 1

Adolescents are often afraid of getting into trouble, which likely contribute to a decision to keep such information private (Bozzola et al., 2022:21). The secrecy around OCSEA may prevent parents and professionals from supporting adolescents who have been exposed to sexually explicit online conversations and interactions. Noteworthy, in this regard, is the statement by the African Union's report on OCSEA in Southern Africa, including South Africa (2020:3-4):

> Despite the scope and actual prevalence of OCSEA being unknown in Africa, there is evidence that proves that Africa as a region is not exempt from this threat. Available research suggests that more and more African children and adolescents are now exposed to online threats and vulnerabilities due to expanded access to new information and communication technologies, whether at home, school or cyber-cafes, where few controls or protection methods are not in place.

It is therefore crucial that professionals conduct research studies on the topic so that OCSEA can be more effectively addressed by social workers as well as parents.

3.4.2.4 Theme 4: General advantages and disadvantages of social media use

The participants voiced their views that there certainly were advantages to social media use. They, however, also mentioned disadvantages of using social media.

- **Sub-theme 4.1: Advantages of social media use**

As consistently communicated by the participants, social media serves as a multifaceted platform for adolescents, offering numerous advantages that enhance their social, educational, and personal development. The participants had the following views on this aspect:

> *"The funny videos or everything, it makes me feel relaxed and when you laugh at a video and it has like 1 million 'likes', you know that there's other people that also like it and then there's kind of a community. … I have a lot of friends that live in Cape Town or in the Free State; through social media we meet and when they are in Pretoria or anything, they will contact me and … we should catch up for everything. … that's very positive of social media and, also, like I said the supporting groups. … because we spend so much time on social media, those videos can be so positive in a way for people."* – Participant 1

> *"Getting to know people and not feeling left out. … you get to also be inspired by people which in most times or in most cases, just create interest in that person's life and it could turn out to be a career for you. So, those are the advantages that come along with social media at that age;*

> *inspiration and career purposes. … Maybe you could become like an inspiration to some people because obviously there are people that are following you and looking up to you."* – Participant 3
>
> *"Like it was also nice with my friends that moved away … so it's nice having that, to build a relationship again and make up for lost time that we had. … [Also], I did choir and hockey, so we used it (WhatsApp) for just the basic communication stuff and everything like that."* – Participant 2
>
> *"Just escaping reality for a little bit and then coming back to reality. … It also was a good way to interact with your friends. … right now, on TikTok, there's always teachers that teach kids maths, you know? And right now, I'm done with high school. I'm just like, 'Why didn't our teachers teach us like how you guys are teaching kids right now?' Because it just looks easy than how we were taught how to do that back then."* – Participant 4
>
> *"I think the advantage is just to escape from reality and just to not feel what you're feeling and just feel a sense of freedom and relaxation."* – Participant 8
>
> *"Social media is there to also give us information about current affairs. … and it can also be used as a form of good entertainment that is not harmful."* – Participant 5

As mentioned by Participant 6 in Sub-theme 2.4, fitness models on social media can also inspire adolescents to do physical exercise and "*start to develop a healthy relationship with the gym."*

The participants shared how interactions on social media could make people relax, keep in contact with others, share information, and be motivated towards a positive lifestyle and future career. For many, social media enable friends and family to maintain connections despite physical distances. The convenience of social media in facilitating connections and maintaining friendships underscores its role in strengthening social bonds (Hill et al., 2016:2). This sense of virtual community also fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with others (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). From an ecological perspective, social media can help adolescents to build a strong mesosystem, which can be a valuable supportive network for them (Sekaran et al., 2017:178).

The educational advantages of social media are also notable from the participants' responses. Using WhatsApp for school-related communication reflects a broader use of social media for academic purposes, enhancing learning and collaboration among

students (Visnjic et al., 2015:64-65). Participant 4's experience with discovering educational content on social media platforms demonstrates how social media can serve as an innovative learning tool, making complex subjects more accessible and engaging (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30). In addition, adolescents can discover new interests and career paths through exposure to diverse content and influencers, potentially shaping their future aspirations (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). The benefits of social media as a source of inspiration and a platform for self-expression is echoed across the participants' experiences, highlighting its positive impact on identity formation and self-esteem (Hausmann et al., 2017:715; Hawk et al., 2019:65).

Some participants emphasised social media's role in providing relief from reality and fostering a sense of happiness and relaxation. Whether through engaging with humorous content, participating in online gaming, or following fitness influencers, social media offers diverse avenues for entertainment, relaxation, and personal growth (ECPAT, INTERPOL & UNICEF, 2022:30; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175).

The research findings confirm several positive outcomes associated with the use of social networking sites (SNS) highlighted in other studies, including the effective management of social connections, opportunities for self-expression and identity exploration, a boost in self-esteem, and the fulfilment of the fundamental need for social belonging (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Oberst et al., 2017:52). These outcomes can be particularly empowering for adolescents, providing avenues for self-expression and the discovery of communities with shared interests.

- **Sub-theme 4.2: Disadvantages of social media use**

The participants generally viewed the disadvantages of social media use in terms of the exposure to negative or harmful comments and/or content. Their observations align with literature indicating that adolescents may not have the full cognitive abilities to navigate the risks associated with social media (Stieger & Wunderl, 2022:2).

> *"I got Instagram and WhatsApp, only those two social media platforms, and then you feel like every little thing that happens in your life you should post on social media. … [Disadvantages include] definitely the hateful comments, obviously, because people get defined by that. … cyber bullying is much easier to do. … Um, but also, as I've mentioned, the strangers that pretend to be someone else … safety reasons. I don't think social media is*

such a good idea. I really think it's unsafe for people in the age 12 to 18." – Participant 1

"I wouldn't recommend an adolescent child to be on social media, because it's just not safe and you can't even control things that are happening on social media and things that they might see. … People post what they want you to see. It's not genuine anymore … I might be biased, but I feel like guys maybe have it a bit easier compared to girls because girls right now who are in like your Grade 8 and Grade 9 … there's so much on social media that they're starting to compare themselves with 30-year-old ladies who've seen life, who've done well for themselves." – Participant 4

"You get to see what you want, but not something that says what you're doing is wrong." – Participant 3

"I think that social media, you know, can be used to spread harmful information. It can also be used to spread, you know, quite disturbing images. It can also perpetuate violence, bullying and, like I said, it can also expose you to predators." – Participant 5

"But I think majority of adolescents are at a stage where they tend to believe everything they see on social media, especially if it's from a creator they trust and then they probably would just take everything they say at face value." – Participant 6

"It's all-over social media that people are trying or are doing suicide because of what other people are saying and what other people's opinions are towards one person on social media." – Participant 8

"You can find a profile of someone saying: 'Hey, I trade Forex, I have this car' and you see a video of him with these cars … and so, we send them money and they take your money. So, I think people are now using social media in a bad way." – Participant 10

The findings are indicative of various ways in which social media use could increase adolescents' vulnerability and put their safety at risk. Overall, the participants suggested that the risks of exposure to harmful content were diverse and often reflected the negative impact it could have on adolescents' well-being. Their concerns about aspects such as hateful comments, safety risks, incorrect information and the deceptive practices of online predators highlight the negative aspects of social media, where users, especially adolescents, may become targets thereof. Harmful messages or content could lead to long-term issues, such as anxiety, depression, and detract from personal development and interpersonal relationships (Farré et al., 2020:9; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016:514).

This reality calls for a critical examination of social media's role in facilitating online interactions and the consequent emotional toll of negative online experiences on adolescents (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The study's findings confirm recommendations on the importance of establishing healthy digital habits to preserve adolescents' physical and mental health (Kelly et al., 2018:59-60; LeBourgeois et al., 2017:s93). From an ecological perspective, these interventions can mitigate the potential harmful effects in the environment, thereby creating a supportive mesosystem (Sekaran et al., 2017:178).

- **Sub-theme 4.3: Actions taken with regards to exposure of inappropriate online content**

Acknowledging the negative effects of exposure to inappropriate online content on them, some participants described how they reacted to negative messages and images they received on social media.

> *"Like I said, those messages that I would get; those unsolicited, inappropriate pictures and then I think another thing that was quite annoying was that some would go comment on your pictures, like all your pictures or your posts … You know, you have to block that account and then you get another one … I didn't really report it because, I wasn't allowed to use the app. … At first, I did not know how to do but, then after I learned, I blocked them, you know, but they kept coming."* – Participant 5

> *"My one friend, she is a girl, but we were close. We were friends from diapers, 18 years of friendship is a long way and a big sense of trust. So, I would go to her and tell her everything that I see."* – Participant 8

> *"So, if I don't like someone and they post something that's remotely linked by just a thread to what I've reported them for, then they can get removed and they can lose their account, [but] I think it just needs to be moderated a bit better."* – Participant 6

As discussed in sub-theme 3.3, Participant 9 felt free to tell a teacher about being bullied online. However, she mentioned that she did not take any action in relation to her exposure to pornography on social media. Unwillingness to discuss this aspect with others was also mentioned by Participant 10.

> *"No, I never told anyone, it was nervous … I just told my friend; I didn't send her the link because I don't experience what I experience."* – Participant 9

> *"I don't think I wouldn't have been much comfortable sitting with my mom or my dad … Deep down, you know that what I'm doing is wrong but I'm not ready for this [reporting exposure to pornography]."* – Participant 10

As adolescents, the participants had different ways of responding to exposure to inappropriate online content and portrayed differences in an understanding of digital environments and the mechanisms available for self-protection. In terms of cyberbullying, the participants demonstrated varying levels of knowledge and responses. Some employed tactics like blocking and reporting, while took steps such as involving authorities, schoolteachers, or seeking medical assistance for emotional distress caused by cyberbullying. Other participants advocated for self-confidence and direct confrontation of bullies in standing up for oneself, relying on close friends for support in navigating these online challenges. Participant 6 advised community enforcement against behaviours such as online bullying, though critiqued the platforms' moderation processes as needing improvement. His views reflect an important aspect since there are so many (how to) self-harm content available online (Memon et al., 2018:385).

However, concerning matters related to pornography, none of the participants disclosed their exposure to their parents or higher authorities. Adolescents seem to discuss negative online experiences with friends, while many tend not to disclose it to anyone because of the fear of getting into trouble (Bozzola et al., 2022:1), which was also mentioned by Participants 9 and 10.

3.4.2.5 Theme 5: Reflections on safety measures for social media use

As young individuals navigate the complexities of the digital world, they encounter various opportunities for learning and for social interaction alongside potential risks such as cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and risks related to personal safety. The participants made suggestions on measures that can be implemented to enhance safe social media usage by adolescents. Their suggestions included those for parents, for adolescents and for professionals.

- **Sub-theme 5.1: Suggestions for parental monitoring and rules**

The significance of parental involvement is constantly emphasised by research suggesting that children whose parents engage with them about their online experiences are more likely to exhibit positive and safer online behaviours and develop

a broad understanding of the digital landscape (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:803). Such involvement is not limited to monitoring and restrictions but includes open dialogue, education on digital literacy, shared online experiences, and fostering an environment of trust and openness that encourages children to share their online encounters and challenges. Some of these measures were also indicated by the participants.

> *"That's why I'm so grateful for my parents, they let me have social media so that I could explore that whole world, but they were also there for me to let me know, that's enough. They once in a while looked at my phone… just for safety reasons."* – Participant 1

> *"My parents only found out I had Instagram I think two years later than what I had it originally. I didn't keep it a secret from them, it just wasn't: 'Oh, mom, I have Instagram.' It didn't bother me at all … it wouldn't be like, 'Oh, she's going through my stuff, I hate her now' … My parents immediately, when they found out I had social media, … they told me everything, how to use it, what to do, what not to do if I get this message, how to react on it and every time when I feel uncomfortable about something, I just need to go to them and then ask them."* – Participant 2

> *"[Parents must] have a talk with them [adolescents] about the dangers, about what could happen … to give them all the information that they need in order to help them."* – Participant 8

> *"They [parents] definitely knew, and they gave approval to let me have social media … they just told me to be careful, not to trust anybody on Instagram and stuff like that, but it was my brother that gave me the guideline and he showed me how to use [social media]. … There has to be rules in place for you to learn, because if you never had those rules and knew how it worked, I think you would be the whole day on your phone."* – Participant 7

> *"Parents should start buying them cell phones when they are 18 years … and they should only use education apps for them to be become better people."* – Participant 9

> *"I think it will be a much easier way to actually learn the correct way, so that you don't go out seeking something … I want to explore. I'm exposed to sex [on social media], I want to learn about it, I want to see it, I want to understand it. But there's no one actually there to sit you down and say what you're doing on social media is actually wrong. … I think at that time, if I had someone to say, come sit down."* – Participant 10

> *"I would have [preferred] somebody tell me the benefits and the harms … if you have an adolescence in your home or close to you, you should talk to them about it … but make them aware of the safety and safety of it, teach them ways that they can be able to protect themselves, you know, monitor their social media usage."* – Participant 5

As indicated by the participants, the role of parents or caregivers in guiding their children's digital journey is critical in ensuring their safety, well-being, and successful navigation of the online world. Most of the participants valued the input of their parents in guiding them in the use of social media, while Participants 5 and 10 expressed a wish that their parents provided guidance during their adolescent years. Through collaborative exploration and discussion of digital content, parents can encourage critical thinking skills and ethical considerations, equipping children to navigate online interactions with discernment and respect for others (Barry, Sidoti, Briggs, Reiter & Lindsey, 2017:9,10). This proactive approach to digital parenting supports children in understanding the implications of their online actions and developing a healthy relationship with digital technology. Participant 9's suggestion to delay the acquisition of smartphones and focus on educational apps reflects a cautious approach to digital engagement. While research on specific age recommendations varies, limiting screen time and ensuring content is age-appropriate are widely supported strategies for positive social media use (Barry et al., 2017:10).

Some participants, however, noted that parental involvement in their children's social media use was not always welcomed by the children themselves.

> *"I was between the age of 12 and 13. … I feel like it is a bit too young for social media … You post everything on social media and … now, where I'm 19, I'm like, why did I do that? Because it can be so harmful. Everything is out in the public and when you're 12 or 13 years old, you don't realise the consequences that posting everything on social media can have and I think when you're a teenager, your mom or your dad can tell you something, but you're like, no, you know, this; you can you follow your own mind."* – Participant 1

> *"I got to learn myself throughout the years' experience. But someone guiding me or showing me the positives and negatives advantages, disadvantages, nothing. No one at all. It has always been me … At that age, If I had someone guiding me on what to do and what not to do … I wouldn't have felt comfortable because for someone who's older than you to advise you not to do something in particular, it's because maybe they've*

> *been through that, and they can see the dangers and the positives, and they would obviously try to keep you away from the dangers. But as a child growing up, you wouldn't want to listen to that, honestly, you would just want to do yourself, you know."* – Participant 3
>
> *"Those beginning years with social media, she [mother] definitely monitored it with an iron fist ... I think it was at the time I probably thought that this is unnecessary and it's embarrassing or whatever, but in hindsight, I think it really helped to keep me safe."* – Participant 6

The participants' experiences regarding parental awareness and guidance of their social media usage thus varied widely, reflecting diverse approaches and attitudes within their families. As recognised by some participants, starting social media at a young age might not have been ideal, recognising the potential harm of oversharing and lack of a sense of responsibility (Inguglia et al., 2015:2-3). Although a lack of communication and guidance from parents regarding online safety increases the risk of adolescents' exposure to inappropriate content (Farré et al., 2020:2), some participants expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of parental advice, believing that adolescents often prefer to make their own decisions despite potential risks. Their attitude that adolescents should be allowed to explore social media on their own highlights a common approach among teenagers: withdrawal and silence, often driven by a desire to independently manage their online experiences or avoid potential parental restrictions on their digital freedom (Choo, Sim, Liau, Gentile & Khoo, 2015:1430).

The ideal situation would be an environment of open communication and monitoring, where parents create an environment for openly discussing any concerns or discomfort, fostering a sense of trust and safety for children to seek guidance when needed (Maitz et al., 2020:2). Recommendations for parental monitoring tools are supported by research indicating that monitoring software, combined with parent-child discussions about online safety, can be effective in promoting safer internet use (Marciano et al., 2021:7).

The participants furthermore believed that adolescents themselves should take greater responsibility for safe social media usage. This aspect is discussed in the next sub-theme.

- **Sub-theme 5.2: Empowering adolescents for safe social media practices**

The participants indicated that safe social media use should not only rely on parental guidance and monitoring, but that adolescents themselves should learn about and employ strategies to prevent the possible pitfalls associated with social media use.

> *"I think that there are people that think you should pick yourself up, you shouldn't give up … Well, I went to consult and told the doctor the situation. … Till this day I can overcome each and every obstacle that comes my way with those droplets [the doctor prescribed]."* – Participant 9

> *"The people don't know you. The people don't know your story and they don't have a right to give an opinion of you or how you look. So, just to roll it, let it roll off your back and like get it into the one ear and out through the other. That normally helps and just to confront your bullies is a big thing. Just to let them know you can stand up for yourself. It doesn't matter what they say, it won't hurt you. … So, just to be proud of yourself and how you look and how you are. … and I think it helped me that I have a strong personality."* – Participant 8

> *"My opinion on that would rather be to avoid that [referring to cyberbullying] … because it honestly just creates a lot of emotional damage. … and to avoid it would just be not to put yourself out there. Use it [social media] as an advantage for you to gain knowledge … but for you to put yourself out there, the lifestyle and all of that, it comes with a lot of bullying and with negative comments." – Participant 3*

> *"If you want to see something, you made that choice. So, if you choose to view something because there's always a warning on, especially on Instagram and YouTube, they give you a warning that says this is mature content or graphic content. Are you sure you want to view this? And if you click yes, then the consequences of that is on you."* – Participant 6

> *"You know, kids are very sensitive in high school, so especially the girls, if you really say something bad or bullying, it would hurt their feelings, they would really like cry or something. … But in some instances, I feel it brings them back to earth and shows them that this post doesn't determine whether you're pretty or ugly or you need that recognition."* – Participant 7

The participants' responses to harmful online content among adolescents highlight possible coping strategies for dealing with negative online experiences. Their suggestions included making choices to avoid potential online risks, adopting a stance of self-acceptance and having the confidence to confront those who post negative comments about them. These measures, coupled with the promotion of supportive peer and adult relationships, can provide adolescents with the tools and confidence

needed to effectively manage their digital well-being and mitigate the adverse effects of exposure to harmful online content. In effect, their narratives highlight the critical role of emotional resilience and support networks in alleviating the impact of negative online experiences such as cyberbullying on victims (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3; Kelly et al., 2018:60). Teaching adolescents resilience, along with strategies to handle online harassment, is crucial in mitigating the negative effects thereof (Biernesser et al., 2020:2).

Sub-theme 5.3: Suggestions for professionals and practitioners

Most of the participants suggested that, in addition to a role of parents to ensure safe social media use, teachers and professionals such as social workers can play a significant role in informing children about online safety and risks.

> *"I think in an ideal world … I know that's a big ask and unrealistic, I think if parents and caregivers or even teachers at school, if we can have those conversations, I think it would go a long way in ensuring that social media are used efficiently and safely."* – Participant 6

> *"I feel like teachers must and parents and everyone must be open to them [adolescents]. Tell them what is going to happen. This is coming towards you, be prepared for this."* – Participant 2

> *"Share stories out there about the consequences of cyberbullying. I think we certainly understand … the influence they do to people, how it will end up. If you can do something like or maybe teachers have a section in school to tell them, if you bully someone, this is how it will feel and if there is a story of someone that ended up committing suicide. … people must be taught how to report such people and how to block them."* – Participant 10

Two participants suggested that school is an ideal setting where children can be given information on safe social media use.

> *"If they go on a Monday morning to school … and they all sit in the school hall or something, then they can't escape to anything and they have to listen to the fact that these people talk to you about the safety risk of social media."* – Participant 1

> *"Kids to get taught [about safe social media use] from a level from a very young age. … I think having the excitement of it's almost school out [end of the school day] and you're getting taught about something that you are already interested in … I think with guidance from teachers, from our social workers, whoever can assist in that category."* – Participant 3

The recommendations from participants highlight the critical role of education, communication, and proactive measures in promoting safe social media use among adolescents. These insights align with existing literature regarding a comprehensive approach for parents, professionals and practitioners to promote safe social media use. The insights from Participant 10 on the importance of educating adolescents about the consequences of cyberbullying, including sharing real-life stories, align with studies advocating for comprehensive anti-bullying programmes that address the emotional impact of cyberbullying and promote empathy among students (Memon et al., 2018:385).

The suggestion from two participants to utilise the school setting, such as school assemblies, as a platform for discussing social media safety aligns with recommendations for integrating digital literacy and online safety into the school curriculum (Stoilova et al., 2021:56). This approach ensures that all students receive consistent and reliable information about navigating digital spaces safely. The importance of open communication between adolescents, parents, and educators regarding the challenges and risks associated with social media, as suggested by the participants, highlight the view that open dialogue can foster trust and encourage adolescents to seek guidance when encountering online issues (Koning et al., 2018:626). Research suggests that teaching children about digital environments from a young age can build a foundational understanding of online safety and responsibility (Inguglia et al., 2015:2).

The testimonies of the participants shed light on the urgent need for concerted efforts among educators, parents, practitioners, professionals, policymakers, and digital platforms to safeguard adolescents from the pervasive risks of harmful content on social media. In this respect, the African Union (2020:3) urges member states to “establish legal policy and regulatory measures to promote cybersecurity.” Such a macrosystemic perspective, which includes legal policies and measures, could initiate comprehensive strategies for safe social media use by children and adolescents (Sekaran et al., 2017:8).

3.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the research methodology utilised, and the ethical considerations observed in the study were outlined. The research findings were subsequently

presented in five themes, each with a number of sub-themes. The following chapter, Chapter 4, is dedicated to summarising the key findings drawn from young adults reflecting on their social media usage during their adolescent years, followed by conclusions and recommendations derived from the study's outcomes.

CHAPTER 4

KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 serves as the conclusion of the report on a study examining young adults' reflections on their social media experiences during adolescence. This chapter will summarise the study's key findings and, based on these findings, draw conclusions and offer recommendations for both practitioners and future research. Additionally, a discussion on how the research goals and objectives were achieved will be provided, beginning with a restatement of the study's goals and objectives.

4.2 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study was to explore and describe young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence, in a case study in Pretoria, Gauteng.

The following objectives were stated for the study:

- To theoretically conceptualise social media and to contextualise it within the South African context.
- To explore and describe participants' use of social media during their adolescent years.
- To explore and describe the participants' perceptions of positive and negative influences of social media use on them during adolescence.
- To obtain suggestions from the participants on promoting optimal use of social media by adolescents.
- To obtain the participants' suggestions for curbing harmful effects of social media on adolescents.

4.3 KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The key findings of the study will be summarised according to the participants' social media use during adolescence, the influence thereof on their lives, the risks they associated with social media use as well as their views on advantages and disadvantages of social media use. Lastly, their reflections on measures to enhance safe social media use are summarised.

4.3.1 The participants' social media use during adolescence

As required in the sampling criteria of the study, all the participants used social media during adolescence.

- The participants started using social media between the ages of 11 and 16 years, correlating with literature indicating that adolescence is generally the stage when social media use starts. Devices used for accessing social media were primarily smartphones.
- Factors influencing the onset of their social media engagement included peer influence, personal curiosity and, to a lesser extent, social media use within the family setting. Furthermore, the transition to social media from face-to-face communication methods was often influenced by relocation to other areas and the resulting changes in their social circles.
- Social media were used for a variety of purposes, including communication, education, entertainment, forming new relationships, and dealing with boredom. Thus, their choice of social media platforms was influenced by their preferences, including educational content, entertainment, and social interaction.
- The findings showed diverse patterns in terms of the time spent on social media use. Most participants spent between 2 and 4 hours per day on social media, however, this time would increase markedly over weekends. Some participants spent between 6 and 10 hours per day on social media, which included time during school breaks. In contrast to studies that show an increase in social media use over the adolescent years, two participants reduced the time spent on social media from their early to later adolescent years.

4.3.2 The influence of social media use on the participants' personal lives

The participants noted a mix of positive and negative impacts on their personal life, including effects on schoolwork, interpersonal relationships and their emotional well-being and physical health.

- Their social media use influenced the participants' schoolwork. The impact varied, with some participants noting distractions from their schoolwork and others finding educational value in using online platforms. Distractions were as a result of constant online notifications, spending time on social media rather than doing homework, and the inability to concentrate due to sleep deprivation because of

late-night social media use. The educational value of social media was related to online sharing of schoolwork and the availability of educational programmes on some social media platforms.

- Close personal relationships were affected differently for the participants. Some reported their relationships being strengthened through providing opportunities for communication with friends and family, regardless of distance. Others reported strained relationships by their pervasive use of social media, especially in their immediate family relationships.
- The participants reported that during their adolescent years, their emotional well-being was influenced by their social media use, with instances of happiness from the connection and opportunities to escape from reality. However, most participant reported effects related to procrastination, stress, insecurity and anxiety from comparisons with 'perfect' online images and cyberbullying.
- Their accounts reflect experiences mostly linked to disrupted sleep patterns due to late-night social media use and one participant mentioned the extreme impact of developing an eating disorder influenced by content viewed online.
- Most of the participants experienced negative effects of social media use on their physical well-being, predominantly because of sleep deprivation because of late-night social media use. Consequently, they were tired during the day, which affected their schoolwork. One participant developed an eating disorder due to comparing herself with a model on social media. Only one participant mentioned a potential positive effect on adolescents' physical well-being, namely starting to do physical exercise to look like fitness models on social media.
- As often described in the literature, social media's influence on the participants' self-esteem and self-perception during their adolescent years was significant, with comparisons leading to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy due to the pressures to conform to the unrealistic images on social media.

4.3.3 Risks associated with social media use

The participants mentioned several risks of social media use. These risks are often described in the literature as aspects of social media use that could harm adolescents' well-being.

- The pressure of 'likes' and followers were highlighted as negative aspects of social media use. Adolescents would be defined by the number of 'likes' they receive, making them feel acknowledged and popular. Those who receive limited 'likes' may develop poor self-esteem, while even those who receive many 'likes' are pressurised to keep up that online image.
- To fit in with the ideal images, trends, norms and expectations they see on social media, adolescents might crate false online profiles, seen as putting on a 'social mask'. The online persona does not represent their true selves and might result in adolescents prioritising their virtual selves over their true self, which may negatively affect opportunities for genuine and meaningful interactions with friends and family.
- Cyberbullying was raised as a prominent issue. The participants highlighted the prevalence of cyberbullying and the harmful effects thereof on adolescents' mental well-being, which they regarded as more severe than experiencing bullying in 'real life'. One participant shared the profound effects that experiences of cyberbullying had on her mental health.
- The exposure to inappropriate content such as nude pictures and pornography was regarded by the participants as a form of sexual harassment which could elicit feelings of fear, violation and powerlessness for adolescents who still had to develop their sense of identity and personal boundaries. The effects could include a lack of safety and trust in others, shame and guilt, which could traumatise adolescents.
- Two participants shared their experiences of exposure to messages of a sexual nature during their adolescent years; exposure described in the literature as online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Adolescents may be trapped in this situation and often feel helpless as they find it difficult to share it with parents.

4.3.4 Advantages and disadvantages of social media use

In line with information in the literature, the participants acknowledged that there are both advantages and disadvantages of social media use of which the following are highlighted:

4.3.4.1 Advantages or positive influences included:

- Helping adolescents to communicate with family and friends, despite geographical distances.
- Enabling adolescents to relax, share information, and receive content that motivate them for a positive lifestyle and future.
- Sharing educational materials between peers and accessing educational content on social media.

4.3.4.2 Disadvantages or negative influences included:

- Adolescents indiscriminately posting information on social media.
- Exposure to hateful comments of incorrect information.
- Becoming targets online predators.
- Noteworthy, is that some participants expressed that they did not know during their adolescent years about the legality of sending inappropriate online content such as pornography, to their peers. It even occurred that the use of pornography was normalised.
- Noting that adolescents may not know how to deal with inappropriate online content or disadvantages of social media, the participants suggested actions that adolescents could take to address this issue. These included confiding in parents, teachers and friends, and obtaining help to report risks to relevant authorities. They acknowledged that this could however be difficult for adolescents to discuss such matters with their parents.

4.3.5 Safety measures for social media use

The participants suggested that parents, adolescents and professionals should take measures to ensure online safety for adolescents.

- The participants advised that parents should be more actively involved in children's and adolescents' social media use. Parents should monitor and provide guidance and rules for children to ensure positive and safe social media use that will prevent them from experiencing the harmful effects thereof. At the same time, some participants shared that parents often do not know about their children's social media use or, if they do, know what their children are exposed to on social media. Furthermore, many children may not want their parents to be involved in this way.

- The participants furthermore suggested that adolescents themselves should make an effort to obtain knowledge and skills about strategies for safe media use, rather than only relying on their parents. They emphasised the aspect that adolescents could make choices about their online behaviours that could contribute to safe social media use.
- Professionals and practitioners such as teachers and social workers could create opportunities to educate children and adolescents about the potential risks involved in social media use. They could present this information at schools and share real-life stories about risks such as cyberbullying, with the learners.

4.4 CONCLUSIONS

- The research findings align with studies showing that social media have become a primary mode of communication for many adolescents and replace traditional methods of face-to-face communication, with many starting to use social media in early adolescence. Smartphones offer a convenient way for adolescents to access social media, most likely due to their portability and to large number of adolescents owning mobile phones.
- Peer influence seems to be a significant initiating factor for social media use, as adolescents feel that ‘everyone is using’ social media. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is a strong influence on adolescents’ social media use.
- Adolescents tend to spend extensive periods of time on various social media platforms according to the perceived benefits, for example communication, social relationships and information, often resulting in negative effects on their lives, e.g. on their sleep patterns, psychological well-being, schoolwork, body image and resulting eating disorders, and face-to-face social interactions.
- Due to the potential harmful effects and the inherent risks of ‘likes’, cyberbullying and social comparison related to social media use on adolescents’ mental health and self-esteem, it can be concluded that responsible and balanced social media usage is crucial for adolescents. Responsible social media use is critical due to studies reporting that social media use can amplify emotional states in unique ways that differ from traditional face-to-face interactions.
- The severe threats to adolescents’ mental health and safety posed by exposure to pornography, online harassment, cyberbullying and inappropriate content can be regarded as a critical challenge in the digital age. Feelings of fear, guilty,

shame, powerlessness and violation could put adolescents at risk, while these feelings may prevent adolescents from seeking help. Furthermore, inappropriate content could profoundly influence teenagers' perceptions of sexuality, intimacy, and gender roles, leading to unrealistic expectations about sex and relationships. The fact that social media is seen as part of the adolescents' immediate microsystem shed light on the significant influence of social media.

- The role of parents, educators, and healthcare professionals is crucial in supervising adolescents' online activities, promoting internet safety, and mitigating the risks associated with pornography and online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This involves open communication about the dangers of online exploitation and the importance of maintaining online privacy and safety.
- Adolescents are in a life stage where autonomy becomes important and may reject the idea of parental guidance and supervision of their social media use. However, the importance of parental involvement is consistently associated with positive and safer online behaviours and adolescents' nuanced understanding of the digital environment. There is a wide range of strategies for parental awareness and involvement in adolescents' social media use, from active monitoring and dialogue to lack of awareness or guidance. Some parents adopt a balanced approach, allowing exploration while providing guidance and oversight, whereas others may be unaware or overly strict, leading to secrecy or lack of open communication about social media use. The importance of non-judgmental communication to build trust is thus fundamental to parental involvement.
- Adolescents often tend to discuss their online experiences with the peer group. Their peers are often the first people to whom adolescents report exposure to inappropriate online sexual or explicit content. Educating adolescents to navigate the complex landscape or social media, which can simultaneously enrich and complicate their lives, could thus empower the entire peer group.
- Educating adolescents on responsible social media use should be integrated with education on adolescent psycho-sexual development to prevent adolescent from seeking information on sexuality on social media platforms. Parent and teachers should thus have sufficient knowledge of these aspects to build foundational understanding of online safety and responsibility.

- In addition to parental involvement, the role of education and educators could be crucial in providing adolescents with the knowledge and skills to use social media responsibly. Schools and teachers can play a proactive role by incorporating digital literacy and online safety into the curriculum, fostering a safe and informed approach to social media use.
- The digital footprint left by sharing explicit images or engaging in online sexual activities can have lifelong negative consequences on adolescents' reputations and future opportunities, underscoring the importance of educating them about the permanency of online content.

4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and conclusions, recommendations are proposed for practice and for future research.

4.5.1 Recommendations for practice

- Evidence of the harm and potential risks involved in social media use calls for urgent and comprehensive strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of social media use. The extensive nature of harmful effects, including the effects on the adolescent and family, schoolwork and child protection risks, required that interventions focus on relevant aspect in all ecological levels.
- To plan and implement relevant interventions to social media use, practitioners, including social workers, should obtain a thorough foundational knowledge of social media use and its advantages, disadvantages and risks. This knowledge should be accompanied by child development characteristics of different developmental stages, also emphasising psychosexual development, so as to understand the potential impact of social media use for each age group.
- Educational and awareness programmes must be offered to children, parents or caregivers, teachers and other persons involved in the field of childcare, child welfare and protection, and child well-being. Programmes can be offered at schools, child and youth care centres (CYCCs), churches, organisations that offer youth programmes, through online programmes and as part of therapeutic or counselling services, as relevant.

- Practitioners should focus on prevention and early intervention strategies, for example involving children in age-appropriate educational programmes from a young age and involving parents of children of preschool age.
- Due to fast-evolving nature of social media, the programmes should be revised and presented on a continuous basis. Interventions should guide the development of resources and workshops for parents on navigating the digital landscape, including the use of parental controls, understanding social media trends, and the psychological effects of social media and pornography on adolescents. Development should be developed with consideration of a needs assessment of parents.
- Supportive systems within schools and in school communities should be established, where adolescents can report concerns regarding adverse online experiences. Support systems could include counselling services, peer support groups, and safe channels for reporting abusive content. Self-regulation and resilience-building strategies can be included in therapeutic and support services to help adolescents to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with online experiences. Targeted mental health services can be offered for adolescents affected by online exploitation or those struggling with the effects of exposure to harmful online content.
- Group work and positive psychology interventions are highlighted as effective strategies for enhancing emotional awareness, social skills and self-esteem among adolescents that could empower them to avoid the disadvantages and harm related to social media use and the importance of open parent-child communication. Guidelines, such as those provided by the Paediatric Association (Nagata, Magid & Gabriel, 2020:1589) could guide interventions regarding screen time according to different age groups. Parents and caregivers can be supported to development individual plans for social media use for and with their children.
- The Department of Education, Child Justice, Department of Social Development and Cyber Crimes Unit are institutions that can work as an interdisciplinary team with technology companies to improve monitoring and reporting mechanisms for abusive content.
- Social workers could engage in advocacy to influence policy changes that protect children and adolescents in terms of online practices. Interventions could involve

supporting legislation that strengthens penalties for online actors, increases funding for victim support services, and mandates comprehensive digital literacy education in schools.

4.5.2 Recommendations for future research

The high and increasing use of social media among children and adolescents suggests a need for further studies on the topic of social media use among children and adolescence. The researcher acknowledges the potential ethical challenges that might arise when conducting research on such sensitive topics involving children. The following examples of potentials studies are suggested:

- Research can be conducted on the experiences of social media use by children of different age groups, such as children in middle childhood.
- Research with parents can focus on their involvement in their children's social media use and factors that influence it.
- Teachers can be involved in research on their perceptions and experiences related to children's social media use and the manifestation thereof in the school environment.
- Research studies with legal professionals and practitioners in the field of child protection can be conducted to explore legal aspects in South Africa concerning online child sexual exploitation and abuse, pornography, child on child online sexual behaviours, amongst others.

4.6 ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study was to explore and describe young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence, in a case study in Pretoria, Gauteng. The study was conducted to answer the following research question: *What are young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media during adolescence?* Following, the researcher will indicate how the objectives of the study were accomplished to achieve the goal of the study and answer the research question.

- **Objective 1: To theoretically conceptualise social media and to contextualise it within the South African context**

To achieve Objective 1, the researcher engaged in an extensive review of relevant literature to theoretically conceptualise social media, discuss adolescence as a

developmental stage, and the characteristics of adolescents' social media use. Information was subsequently presented on the potential physical, cognitive, emotional, mental health and social effects of social media use on adolescents. social media use. Lastly, the role of parents, educators and professionals as well as recommended prevention and intervention strategies to promote healthy social media use were discussed. The theoretical background presented in Chapter 2 together with the discussion of the ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework of the study in Chapter 1 allowed the researcher to accomplish Objective 1 of the study.

- **Objective 2: To explore and describe participants' use of social media during their adolescent years**

To accomplish this objective, the researcher employed a qualitative approach, according to which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants who had experienced the use of social media during adolescence. The participants provided information on aspects such the age when they started using social media, time spent on social media and the social media platforms they preferred.

- **Objective 3: To explore and describe the participants' perceptions of positive and negative influences of social media use on them during adolescence**

By employing semi-structured interviews as qualitative research methods, the research could gather rich narratives that provided information on how their social media use influenced their personal lives during adolescence, and their perceptions and experiences of risks generally associated with social media use. The participants shared about aspects such as the use of 'likes', cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content, and furthermore provided their views on general advantages and disadvantages of social media use. Drawing on the ecological systems theory, the prevalence and effects of social media use in different ecological levels in the participants' contexts was highlighted.

- **Objective 4: To obtain suggestions from the participants on promoting optimal use of social media by adolescents**

Throughout the data collection interviews, the participants reflected on their own experiences and offered insights into what strategies, tools, or practices could have enhanced their experiences in terms of social media use. Their suggestions included

the need for digital literacy education, setting boundaries for social media use, and fostering open dialogues about online safety between adolescents and adults. Thereby, Objective 4 has been accomplished.

- **Objective 5: To obtain the participants' suggestions for curbing harmful effects of social media on adolescents**

Objective 5 was accomplished through asking the participants to reflect on what measures could protect adolescents from harmful effects of social media use. The participants suggested that parents should monitor and set rules for adolescents' social media use. In addition, adolescents should also take responsibility to empower themselves by means of strategies to avoid the potential risks and harm of social media use. Lastly, the participants suggested strategies and interventions by professionals and practitioners such as teachers and social workers that could protect adolescents against harmful effects of social media use.

Through accomplishing the objectives of the study, it is concluded that the goal of the study has been achieved and the research question that guided the study has been answered.

4.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research concluded that social media is deeply integrated into adolescents' lives, playing a crucial role in their communication, self-expression, and information gathering on various fields of their lives. While social media offers valuable opportunities, it also poses risks, such as cyberbullying, the exposure of pornography and online child sexual exploitation and abuse. To mitigate these dangers, it's essential to educate adolescents on safe and responsible online practices, emphasising privacy, responsible sharing, and digital literacy.

Parents, educators, and community support systems must collaborate to guide adolescents in navigating the digital world safely. By fostering open dialogues, setting boundaries, and promoting critical thinking, these stakeholders can help adolescents harness the positive aspects of social media while minimising potential harm. A comprehensive, multi-systemic approach is necessary to support adolescents' well-being and ensure they can benefit from social media without being exposed to the disadvantages of social media.

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Appendix A

Interview schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:

The goal of this study is to get an understanding of adolescents' experiences of the use of social media, for example Facebook, Twitter. In this interview, I would like to get information on how you experienced social media use when you were a teenager, between the ages of 11 and 18 years old.

Name: …….

Age: …….

Gender: …….

How old were you when you first started using social media?

For what purpose did you use social media when you were a teenager?

What social platforms did you use during your teenage years and for what reasons?

How much time did you spend on social platforms per day or per week?

How did social media use influence your life and well-being during your teenage years, for example, the following aspects:

- personal relationships with parents, family and friends
- school work
- health
- emotions
- ideas about yourself
- activities?

Can you give me your opinion about the following?

- the use of 'likes' on the social media
- that people use social media as a 'mask' and do not present themselves as they are in real life
- the occurrence of bullying on social platforms
- if social media is a safe platform for adolescents
- talking to others whom you do not know in person.

In general, what do you think are advantages or positive influence of social media use that you experienced as a teenager?

What do you think are generally disadvantages or harm that can be caused by social media use? Did your parents/caregivers know about your social media use during your teenage years? Please explain.

In your opinion, how can teenagers (adolescents) be helped to get the benefits of the use of social media?

What suggestions can you make to teenagers and to social workers/teachers/parents to prevent harmful effects of social media use on teenagers?

APPENDIX B

Ethical clearance

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Humanities 100. Since 1919

12 November 2020

Dear Ms C Schoeman

Project Title:	Young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence
Researcher:	Ms C Schoeman
Supervisor(s):	Dr MP le Roux
Department:	Social Work and Criminology
Reference number:	13031768 (HUM017/1020)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 29 October 2020. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

Prof Innocent Pikirayi
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

APPENDIX C

Informed consent

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Humanities 100.
1919 - 2019
Department of Social Work & Criminology

Researcher: Charmanay Schoeman
Degree: MSW Play-based Intervention
Contact details: 084-792-6026

INFORMED CONSENT BY PARTICIPANT

Name of participant: _____

1. Title of the study

Young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. The focus of the research is to obtain a better understanding of how adolescent experience social media use, as more adolescents have access to and use social media.

3. Procedures

I will be requested to take part in a personal interview with the researcher. The researcher is interested in my experiences of the use of social media when I was an adolescent. The interview is expected to last about one hour and an audio-recording of the interview will be made. All information will be handled confidentially and only the researcher and her supervisor at the University of Pretoria will have knowledge of what I share in the interview.

4. Possible risks

The interview will focus on my experience of social media use as an adolescent. As my social media use as an adolescent happened a few years ago, it is expected that there will be less of a chance that I will feel distressed as a result of the interview. However, if I experience any emotional distress because of the interview, the researcher will assist me to obtain counselling, either telephonic or in person, free of charge

5. Benefits of participation

I will not receive any payment or gifts for taking part in the study. However, the information that I give can help social workers to become aware of how teenagers may experience the use of social media.

6. Rights as a participant

I am aware that my participation is voluntary. I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time, without having to explain why. There will be no negative consequences for me if I decide to withdraw from the study.

7. Confidentiality

The recording of the interview will be typed out word for word. Both the recording and the typed document will be handled with strict confidentiality and will be safely stored by the researcher. Only the researcher and her supervisor at the university will have access to this information. If I should withdraw from the study, my information will be destroyed. After completion of the research all the documents will be safely stored according to the guidelines of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria.

The researcher will write a report on the study. My name or personal details will not appear in the report. I will be able to request the researcher to read the typed document on the information that I provided during the interview, if I wish to do so.

8. Contact details

If I need more information about this research, I can contact the researcher at her e-mail charmanayschoeman@gmail.com or on her cell number as provided above.

9. Data storage

I am aware that the research information will be stored for 15 years in the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, as stipulated in their policy.

10. Data usage

The findings of this research will be used for a research report and possibly for professional publications and conference papers. The findings may also be used for further research. If used for further research, the information will still be regarded as confidential, as described above. I provide permission that the research findings may also be used for future research.

10. Permission for participation in the research study

I, the undersigned, understand the information provided above. I had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and all my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I understand what the research is about and why it is being done.

I understand my rights as a participant and give my permission to voluntarily participate in the research study.

I have received a copy of this letter.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____