

**YOUNG ADULTS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR EXPERIENCES OF
SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING ADOLESCENCE**

by

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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 (19227362/HUM014/01020).

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

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

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Social media is an Internet-based application that enable people to communicate and interact with others online, form relationships, access information, and create and share content with people known or not known to them, even those in distant locations. Through popular social media platforms such as Facebook, people can upload information in the form of text, images, and videos and share it with others. As such, social media use has changed traditional ways of interaction and communication and has obtained increased population. Social media use is popular among adolescents and for many has become part of their daily lives. Although social media have many benefits, as indicated above, it also has numerous potential risks for adolescents' emotional, social, physical and academic functioning. The goal of this study, which formed part of a group research project on the topic, was to gain a better understanding of adolescent's experiences of social media use as described by a sample of young adults.

Following an interpretivist research paradigm, a qualitative research approach, applied research and a case study design, data were collected from a sample of 11 participants who were recruited by means of purposive and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews with the use of an interview schedule were used for data collection and data were analysed by means of thematic analysis. Relevant research ethical principles were upheld during the study.

The research findings indicated that social media use formed an important part of the participants' lives during adolescence. They were between the ages of 10 and 16 when they started using social media and accessed and spent considerable time on various social media platforms daily. Negative effects of social media use included emotional distress, cyberbullying, creating a 'false online life' to live up to certain standards, poor

academic performance, negative body image and strained family relationships. The positive effects were less obvious, and included better mental well-being and academic performance for some, and the benefits of sharing information online. Two important risks that could affect adolescents' personal safety were highlighted, namely engaging with strangers with harmful intent, and exposure to content such as pornography. The participants made several suggestions for parents, schools and teachers, social workers, and adolescents that could prevent risks of social media use.

It is recommended that, since social media has become part of the modern lifestyle, interventions should focus on educating adolescents, parents, teachers, and social workers on responsible social media use. Further research, for example on legislation relevant to social media use, parental knowledge, and the role of schools in curbing social media use can provide more insight into the topic of adolescent social media use.

KEY CONCEPTS

Social media

Internet

Social network sites

Adolescence

Young adult

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Recent developments in technology led to a substantial increase in wireless and Internet communication (Badri, Alnuaim, Rashedi, Yang & Temsah, 2017:2656). The advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have changed how people contact and communicate with others using electronic technologies such as smartphones, personal computers, and tablets, and have become part of people's lives (Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand & Chamarro, 2017:51). ICTs provide opportunities for individuals to interact face-to-face in the digital space (Livingstone, Nandi, Banaji & Stoilova, 2017:28). One of the benefits is the development of social networking sites (SNS), also referred to as Internet-enabled social media, that enable users to socially interact with one another through the above-mentioned technological devices (Badri et al., 2017:2656; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Moawad & Ebrahim, 2016:174; Shields-Nordness, 2015:1).

According to Whitehill, Trangenstein, Jenkins, Jernigan and Moreno (2020:250), it is clear from observations that traditional media has lost some of its appeal because of social media's widespread use. Social media is defined as an online platform that enables users to develop and share content, social networks, and activities (Heinrichs, Lim & Lim, 2011:350; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61; Kasavana, Nusair & Teodosic, 2010:257). Social media provide platforms enable people to connect with others, form new relationships, communicate with others, and access information (Brake & Safko, 2009:6; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Oberst et al., 2017:51).

In recent years there has been a global increase in the use of social media (Bekalu, McCloud & Viswanath, 2019:704; Borgström, Daneback & Molin 2019:129). Social media applications have entrenched itself into people's daily life, affecting their social interactions, institutional frameworks, and professional norms (Akram & Kumar, 2017:347). Jang, Han, Shih and Lee (2015:4039) add that although social media is used by people of all ages, the use of social media among adults is high. Other studies found that adolescents and young adults were the age groups with the highest social media use while children of younger ages have increasing access to the Internet

(Bekalu et al., 2019:704; Bergström et al., 2019:129; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:1; Sirola, Kaakinen, Savolainen, Paek, Zych & Oksanen, 2021:19).

Several authors emphasise the high prevalence of social media use by adolescents, to the extent that it has become part of their daily lives (Boer, Stevens, Finkenauer & Van den Eijden, 2020:1; Buda, Lukoševičiūtė, Šalčiūnaitė & Šmigelskas, 2021:1031; Moreno & Uhls, 2019:1). Hawk, Van den Eijnden, Van Lissa and Ter Bogt (2019:65) state that access to the Internet through smart phones at different places such as malls and schools implies that young people are the people who use social media the most. Globally, it is estimated that one third of Internet users are children, with the proportion being higher in developing countries (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113). Kemp (2023) state that by January 2023 there were 25.8 million social media users in South Africa, which is equivalent to 42.9% of the population. In 2020, Clement (2020) indicated that adolescent girls between the ages of 13 to 17 years accounted for 5.6% of social media users, and adolescent boys of the same age group constituted 4.7% of social media users in South Africa; amounting to about 10% of social media users in the country.

Social media provides adolescents with the means to connect with friends, classmates and others who have similar interests (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). In addition, it provides an opportunity for adolescents to use virtual classrooms to learn from each other regarding their schoolwork and to work together on projects (Mazman & Usluel, 2011:133; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Another benefit of social media use for adolescents is that it promotes reading and creativity through reading posts of others and reading online newspapers (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Marginalised adolescents who lack the opportunity to find face-to-face means of support can use social media to look for assistance from others and benefit emotionally (Barth, 2015:203-204, 206; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Weinstein & Davis, 2015:932). Glover and Fitch (2018:176) add that the LGBTQ youth can use social media to communicate with others and provide each other with support despite geographical distance. Adolescents can be educated about illness, be comforted by support groups and gain awareness by using social media to get in touch with others who are suffering from the same illness or medical issues (Reid & Weigle, 2014:74).

The increase in digital technology and especially in the use of social media enhances

people's access to information, connection with others, education, and support by social groups or professionals; however, there is also concern that social media use can put children and adolescents at risk for mental health problems such as depression and suicide (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113). The use of social media by adolescents can thus have both positive and negative influence which affects teenagers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5). Teenagers are spending a lot more time on screens, both at home and at school, which has led to concerns about how these activities may affect their overall development (Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield & Gross, 2000:129).

In the past decade research has reported an increase on problematic social media use disorder or addiction among adolescents (Paakkari, Tynjälä, Lahti, Ojala & Lyyra, 2021:1). The use of social media can have harmful psychological effects and, in addition to being a reality, the effects can be serious depending on the adolescents' unique circumstances (Bryant, 2018:18). Adolescents who are unable to apply self-control in their social media use as a way of limiting their use, are at more likely to develop social media addiction and mental health issues (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). The onset of depression, stress and anxiety can be the result of physical, cognitive and social effects which may be caused by social media use (Bryant, 2018:19). Woods and Scott (2016:45) in their study conducted in Scotland among adolescents aged 11 and 17 found that adolescents who have an emotional investment in social media and regularly use it at night have high levels of anxiety, depression, insomnia, and low self-esteem.

Social media use is also associated with certain risks. These include cyberbullying, which is behaviour such as spreading false rumours and sending hurtful messages intended to cause harm to others while concealing one's identity behind technology (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010:207; Reid & Weigle, 2014:75). Furthermore, social comparison with images on social media can lead to poor self-esteem and poor mental health (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8; Fardouly, Magson, Johnco, Oar & Rapee, 2018:1464). Body image dissatisfaction because of comparison to ideal body images online can lead to eating disorders, namely anorexia, bulimia nervosa, or binge eating (Bryant, 2018:18). Adolescents can also become the target of sexual grooming, online harassment, or exposure to pornography by persons with malicious intent (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113-114). A study by Mahamid and Berte (2019:107) confirmed

that social media misuse among adolescents is commonly known. Extensive use of social media could thereby lead to social media addiction (Paakkari et al., 2021:1). Although there are legislation and policies that are intended to protect social media users against such risks, many people, including adolescents, do not have knowledge of these (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:8).

Adolescents often use social media privately without their parents having insight into their practices (Dzoro, Chereni & Gwenzi, 2019:94). To curb children's exposure to risk, Undiyaundeye (2014:14) recommends that parents and adults should be actively involved with their children's Internet and social media use. Children whose parents limit their time spent on social media were found to have better mental health (Fardouly et al., 2018:1465). However, research indicates that parents often do not have adequate knowledge of the Internet and social media, which makes it difficult to monitor the content and nature of interactions of their children on social media (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13; Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). Therefore, parents should be educated on social media use and the potential risks it can have for adolescents (Goodyear, Armour & Wood, 2018:9).

This study focused on social media use as experienced during adolescence. Adolescence is the life stage between the ages of 11 and 18 years and is characterised by significant physical and physiological changes (Berk, 2013:6; Louw & Louw, 2014:303-305). The onset of puberty is often related to heightened emotional stress (Arnett, 2021:377; Berk, 2013:419). However, it is recognised that many adolescents do not develop emotional or behavioural problems (Vijayakumar, De Macks, Shirtcliff & Pfeifer, 2018:429).

Although adolescents' cognitive development allows them to reason and think more like adults, they also experience a distorted thinking pattern, known as adolescent egocentrism (Berk, 2013:253; Louw & Louw, 2014:323). Adolescent egocentrism result in greater self-consciousness, but also a sense of being invincible that leads to risk-taking behaviour (Berk, 2013:255-256). Adolescents are furthermore self-focused, idealistic and critical (Arnett, 2016:263-264; Berk, 2013:253-254).

Adolescents have the key developmental task of forming a personal identity, thus, defining who they are and whom they wish to become (Louw & Louw, 2014:342-343). Successful completion of this task results from exploring and experimenting with

different roles and critically reflecting on values and is important for adolescents' positive psychosocial development (Davel, 2017:64; Louw & Louw, 2014:342-343; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). However, their development is still strongly influenced by their parents and families (Louw & Louw, 2014:364).

The adolescent years are associated with a need for greater independence from their family and therefore the peer group becomes more important (Berk, 2013:205-206; Sigelman & Rider, 2009:486). Adolescents wish to spend more time with their peers, have a need for belonging to and fitting in with peers, and value the opinions of the peer group (Berk, 2013:579; Crone & Konijn, 2018:1; Louw & Louw, 2014:367). Exclusion from the peer group lead to social and emotional problems (Dyches & Mayeux, 2015:255).

The developmental characteristics of adolescents might make them more vulnerable to the risks involved in social media use. The goal of this study was to explore young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. The study sample consisted of young adults who could reflect on their experiences of social media use. It was reasoned that young adults might reflect more objectively on social media use during their adolescent years. The study was conducted as an individual study that formed part of a group research project on the topic.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The research was based on the ecological systems theory, which is one of the most well-known and widely used theoretical frameworks in various disciplines and practice fields in the social sciences, including the social work profession (Kamenopoulou, 2016:515; Kleintjes, Abrahams, Yako, Lake & Tomlinson, 2021/2022:32; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:308; Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina & García Coll, 2017:900). The ecological systems theory was developed by Urie Bronfenner over two main periods, the 1970s and 1990s (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017:901).

The ecological approach proposes that the developing child is influenced by the social environment and provides insight into the multiple factors that influence children's lives (Berk, 2013:26; Moran, Frank, Zhao, Gonzalez, Thainiyom, Murphy & Ball-Rokeach, 2016:135; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:309-310). Bronfenbrenner acknowledges that children's development is also influenced by their biological characteristics, which he

indicated in a later description of his model as the bioecological model (Berk, 2013:26). In this study, the researcher will refer to Bronfenbrenner's theory as the ecological systems theory (*cf.* Berk, 2013:26).

The ecological systems theory divides the social environment into a series of complex and interactive systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Berk, 2013:26; Louw, Louw & Kail, 2014:29; Moran et al., 2016:135). All these systems are interrelated and have a substantial effect on children's development (Berk, 2013:26). Each system can be further divided into sub-systems (Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:309).

The *microsystem* is the child's immediate environment which the child has direct contact with and includes the child's home and immediate family, the school with the peers and teachers, the peer group, the street, playground and the immediate neighbourhood (Berk, 2013:27; Christensen, 2016:22; Kamenopoulou, 2016:516; Moran et al., 2016:1; Louw et al., 2014:29; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:313; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017:901). The microsystem thus consists of the child's physical setting, significant people in the child's life, and the mutual activities in which they engage (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017:901). Being the environment in which children are actively involved, the microsystem has the strongest influence on children's lives (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29). The relationships and interactions in the microsystem are bi-directional in nature, implying that the child's physical characteristics, personality and abilities will have an influence on environment just as the environment will have an influence on the child (Berk, 2013: 27; Louw et al., 2014:29). The child is thus an active participant in his or her environment (Berk, 2013:27; Christensen, 2016:23).

The *mesosystem* refers to the connections and relationships between the different microsystems that exist in the child's life (Berk, 2013:27; Christensen, 2016:23; Kamenopoulou, 2016:516). The perspective of the mesosystem indicates that "what happens in one microsystem is likely to influence the other microsystems" (Louw et al., 2014:29). In the relationship between the microsystems of the home and the school, as example, the role of the parents at home will influence the child's learning at school (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29). The "richness of the child's mesosystem" relates to the number and the quality of the connections between

different microsystems (Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:315). Strong and positive connections between different microsystems create a supportive environment for children and are especially important for children growing up in poverty (Berk, 2013:27; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:315).

The *exosystem* comprises of the broader social context in which the child is not directly involved, but it still has an influence on the child (Berk, 2013:28; Christensen, 2016:23; Kamenopoulou 2016:516; Louw et al., 2014:29; Moran et al., 2016:135). The events in the exosystem have an indirect influence on the child due to their influence on the child's primary setting or microsystem (Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:312). The political system, legislative institutions, religious, health care and social services institutions, and mass media are larger social contexts included in the exosystem (Kamenopoulou, 2016:516; Louw et al., 2014:29; Moran et al., 2016:135). The exosystem also contains formal institutions such as the parents' workplace and related aspects such as their work hours and leave allowance, and the parents' informal social networks that provide support to them, for example their friends and family (Berk, 2013:28).

The *macrosystem* refers to the widest ecological system in which the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem are embedded (Berk, 2013:28; Louw et al., 2014:29). This system contains the overall societal and cultural norms, ideologies, and values relevant to the context in which the individual lives (Christensen, 2016:23; Kamenopoulou, 2016:516; Moran et al., 2016:135). Although not directly involved in this system, the macrosystem has a significant influence on the life of the child (Louw et al., 2014:29). This influence is because the values in the macrosystem "trickle down through the various layers in the ecosystem to shape attitudes and behaviours" (Collins et al., 2010 in Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:311).

The influence of time on human development is integrated into the ecological systems theory by the inclusion of the chronosystem (Crawford, 2020:2; Louw et al., 2014:30). The chronosystem indicates changes that take place over time in systems and their members, which include developmental changes in the person or changes in the environment (Berk, 2013:29; Crawford, 2020:2; Kamenopoulou, 2016:516; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017:903; Walls, 2016:41). The chronosystem thus includes changes such as change related to the child's development, the child entering school, the death of a parent, relocation, or the birth of a sibling (Berk, 2013:28; Louw et al., 2014:30).

Social media use is an activity favoured by adolescents – the age group relevant to the study – and has become part of their daily lives (Buda et al., 2021:1031; Boer et al., 2020:1). Johnson and Puplampu (2008:4) describe the Internet as a techno-subsystem and, due to its availability in the child’s immediate environment, place it together with other technology such as television in the child’s microsystem. This view proposes that children use technology as an element in their immediate or direct environment for communication, information, and recreation (Johnson, 2010:178). Senekal, Groenewald, Wolfaardt, Jansen and Williams (2022:1) confirm the significant influence of social media on adolescents’ lives by stating the following: “Adolescents are noted to increasingly utilise social media for communication, and therefore, social media is where much of their psychosocial development takes place.”

However, Merrill and Liang (2019:2) regard the techno-subsystem as more appropriate to the chronosystem due to the consistent change in technology over time. Social media use is a phenomenon that has increased worldwide. Adolescents and young adults were found to be the age group with the highest social media use while children of younger ages have increasing access to the Internet (Bekalu et al., 2019:704; Borgström et al., 2019:129; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:1).

The researcher is of the opinion that the techno-subsystem can also relate to the mesosystem due to its role of linking the child’s microsystems such as the home and the peer group. When adolescents receive support or information on social media sites, it can strengthen the mesosystem. The availability of the Internet might also relate to the exosystem, which contains aspects such as the mass media.

It is evident that the techno-subsystem can have a substantial influence on adolescent’s lives as they can access social media in the immediate environment of the home or peer group (the microsystem) or use it to form relationships and share information with family members or members of the peer group (the mesosystem). Social media can also influence adolescents’ social behaviour and norms, which could relate to social values embedded in the macrosystem. The ecological systems theory is thus seen as a relevant theoretical framework for the study, which focused on the experience of social media use during adolescence.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE

The advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) brought about changes in the way people interact and communicate, with an increase in communication in the digital space (Badri et al., 2017:2656; Livingstone et al., 2017:28; Oberst et al., 2017:51). Social networking sites became a popular way in which people socially interact and has replaced much of the traditional ways of communication (Badri et al., 2017:2656; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Moawad & Ebrahim, 2016:174; Shields-Nordness, 2015:1; Whitehill et al., 2020:250). Globally, there has been an increase in the use of social media platforms, also in South Africa (Brake & Safko, 2009:6; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Kemp, 2023; Oberst et al., 2017:51).

Social media enable people to connect with others, gain access to information, freely express themselves, upload and share text messages and images, interact socially, and collaborate with others (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Hughes, 2018:8; Lindsay, 2011:1). Globally, social media use has increased significantly in recent years (Bekalu et al., 2019:704; Borgström et al., 2019:129). The use of social media especially became a popular activity among adolescents and social media use has become part of their daily lives (Boer et al., 2020:1; Buda et al., 2021:1031; Moreno & Uhls, 2019:1; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:800).

Social media use enables adolescents to connect with friends, find and exchange information about schoolwork, find support from others and find information of health-related matters, amongst others (Barth, 2015:203-204, 206; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Undiyaundeye, 2014:14; Weinstein & Davis, 2015:932). However, amidst these benefits, social media can also involve risks to children’s mental and physical well-being, for example anxiety, depression, Internet addiction, eating disorders, cyberbullying, poor self-esteem and sexual grooming (Bryant, 2018:18; Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113-114; Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8; Paakkari et al., 2021:1).

It appears that adolescents have different views of the impact of social media use on them and that knowledge on this aspect is generally limited (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5; Hussain & Griffiths, 2018:2). Even professionals appear not to have an adequate understanding of social media use and its impact on adolescents (Barth, 2015:201). Parents also have been found to lack knowledge of the Internet and social

media (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13; Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). Based on a literature review of international studies on social media use among adolescents, Senekal et al. (2022:13) recommend that more research should be conducted on the phenomenon in the South African context.

This study aimed to explore how South African adolescents might experience social media use. The following research question was stated for the research: *“What are young adults’ reflections on their experiences of social media during adolescence?”*

1.4 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.

The objectives of the study were stated as follows:

- 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.

1.5 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As the researcher wished to explore the subjective experiences of the research participants on their social media use during adolescence, and interpretivist research paradigm was followed (Niewenhuis, 2016a:60). For the same reason, a qualitative research approach was followed. Qualitative research was relevant for gaining an understanding of social media use as experienced and described by the participants (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013:394; Fouché, 2021a:42).

The type of research was applied research as the research findings could possibly be used by social workers and other professionals who work with adolescents and may

seek solutions to problems related to social media use (Bless et al., 2013:389; Fouché, 2021b:58; Jansen, 2016:9). The study had an exploratory and a descriptive purpose as the researcher explored the participants' experiences of social media use to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon, and subsequently provided a description of the phenomenon (Fouché, 2021b:65; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:54-55).

The study was planned and implemented according to a case study design. A case study design was relevant for the researcher to collect in-depth data from a small sample of participants (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2012:193). The instrumental case study was specifically implemented as the goal of the study was to obtain knowledge and insight into a specific phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82-83; Schurink, Schurink & Fouché, 2021a:303, which in the case of this study was social media use among adolescents in a South African context.

The study population consisted of young adults who used social media during their adolescent years as they would be able to provide information on the topic and the conclusions of the study would be linked to them (Welman et al., 2012:52). The research sample was recruited in the southern region of Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, which was thus the target population for the study (Bless et al., 2013:164).

Being a qualitative study, a non-probability sampling method was used (Schurink et al., 2021a:289). With the use of purposive sampling, the participants had to meet certain sampling or inclusion criteria which ensured that data relevant to the research topic were collected (Strydom, 2021a:382). As the researcher did not have knowledge of the target population, snowball sampling was used to gain access to participants (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198; Strydom, 2021a:383). The study sample consisted of 11 participants. The sample was of a sufficient size to obtain data saturation, where no new information was obtained during data collection interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:84).

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, in which an interview schedule or guide with open-ended questions were used to guide the interview and probe the participants' answers (Geyer, 2021:358; Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93). The participants provided their permission for the researcher to digitally record the interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93-34). A pilot study was conducted with one person who met the sampling criteria to determine whether sufficient information could be

collected considering aspects such as sampling criteria and data collection method (Bless et al., 2013:394; Fouché, 2021a:50-51; Strydom, 2021b:239). The pilot study confirmed that no changes were needed to these aspects, and sufficient information was obtained during the pilot study to include it in the final data set.

Data was analysed by means of thematic analysis according to the steps described by Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015:230). Furthermore, the researcher attended to the aspect of data quality by considering the elements of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123). The research was conducted with consideration of ethical research principles such as avoidance of harm, voluntary participation and informed consent, confidentiality, no deception and debriefing of participants (*cf.* Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021).

1.6 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

- **Social media**

Social media is defined as a type of technology and an Internet application that enable individuals who have access to the Internet to connect, freely express themselves, share text messages and images, collaborate and interact socially with others on a virtual platform (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Hughes, 2018:8; Lindsay, 2011:1). Carr and Hayes (2015:20) define social media as “[i]nternet-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.” Social media is accessed by means of technological devices such as computers, smartphones or tablets (Shields-Nordness, 2015:1).

- **Internet**

The Internet is described as a wireless connection that enables people to search for information, to communicate, play games and download information (Mesch & Talmund, 2010:46). The Internet enables users to digitally transfer information instantly and worldwide (Davel, 2017:33).

- **Social network sites**

Oberst et al. (2017:1) define social network sites (SNS) as "[w]eb-based virtual communities allowing the construction of an individual and partially public profile." Social network sites provide a platform that allows for the sharing of information and interests about oneself with friends, family, colleagues, and the community at large (Brake & Safko, 2009:26). People can create their own content, including text, pictures, audio and video content, and share it with others whom they add as friends (Shields-Nordness, 2015:2).

- **Adolescence**

Louw and Louw (2014:303) define adolescence as "the period of transition between childhood and adulthood and the life stage can thus be seen as a developmental bridge between being a child and becoming an adult." The adolescent life stage spans the ages of 11 to 18 years and involves the onset puberty and the related physical changes, the ability for abstract thinking, the development of a personal identity, and greater autonomy from the family (Berk, 2013:6; Louw & Louw, 2014:342). In this study, the key focus was on young adults' experiences of social media use during their adolescent years.

- **Young adult**

The participants in this study were in the life stage of young adulthood. Arnett (2016:27) mentions that it is difficult to indicate the life stages after childhood and adolescence in terms of age. Young adulthood is characterised by the gradual assumption of adult responsibilities. In this study, the participants were young adults between the ages of 19 and 25 years.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researcher regards the following aspects as limitations of the study:

- The sample of the study consisted of 11 participants within a specific geographical area. The researcher is of the view that a larger sample from different areas could provide a more in-depth understanding of adolescents' social media use.
- Although generalizability is not an aim of qualitative studies, it must be acknowledged that the findings from the small study sample and specific

geographical area may not apply to other contexts in South Africa.

- Most of the participants in the study were females and limited information was thus obtained on social media use by males.

1.8 CONTENTS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

The research report is presented in the following chapters:

Chapter 1: General introduction to the study

A general introduction to the study was presented in this chapter. The researcher provided an introduction of the research topic, the theoretical framework, the rationale and problem statement, goal and objectives of the study, a summary of the research methodology, defined the key concepts and concluded with the limitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature review: Social media use among adolescents

The chapter focused on the main themes in the literature that are relevant to the research topic. A discussion on the concept social media, prevalence and purpose of social media use, adolescents and social media use, social media and legislation, the effects of social media use on adolescents and the adolescent developmental stage are provided as background to the discussion of the research findings.

Chapter 3: Research methodology and empirical findings

The research methodology and ethical considerations for the study are described in Chapter 3, followed by the presentation of the research findings.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

The key findings of the research and conclusions are presented in Chapter 4. Based on these, recommendations for practice and research are proposed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG ADOLESCENTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Social media use has become a popular activity in the everyday life of adolescents (Sampasa-Kanyinga, Chaput & Hamilton, 2019:190). Staying connected by means of social media has become a “way of being” for adolescents, yet social media can be harmful for some users (Marino, Gini, Angelini, Vieno & Spada, 2020:1). A study by Mahamid and Berte (2019:107) confirm that social media misuse appears to be common in this age group. Marino et al. (2020:4) found in their study that the frequent use of social media by adolescents is depended on the perceived frequency of social media use by their peers. Adolescents use social media more these days than the generations before, which can have both advantages and disadvantages for them (Bryant, 2018:2).

The goal of this study was to explore and describe young adults’ reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. In this chapter, the researcher presents a literature review on the extant discourse in the literature and focuses on conceptualising social media, the prevalence and usage of social media through Internet-enabled information and communication technologies (ICTs), the effects of social media use on adolescents, and developmental characteristics of adolescents.

2.2 CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL MEDIA

According to Carr and Hayes (2015:47), social media is a concept that is difficult to describe and situate in the dynamic technological environment. In this section, the researcher will focus on providing a definition of social media and the related concept of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

2.2.1 Defining social media

Sirola et al. (2021:1) define social media as “platforms that provide means of interaction, social networking, content sharing and identity development with other people.” This definition links with that of Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Loureiro and Solnet (2013:248) who define social media as an online service that permits the user to create and share different content online. Users interact on social media through web-based software or applications that they access

by means of a computer, smartphone, or tablet (Shields-Nordness, 2015:1). The activities of creating and sharing online content is made possible by using applications based on the technologies of Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61).

There has been a rapid growth of technology since the mid-90's which brought about the introduction of web-based software known as social media (Lindsay, 2011:1). The Internet is a vast wireless network that links computers worldwide. With the availability of the Internet, people can exchange information and interact from anywhere with an Internet connection that allows users to search for information, interact, play games, and download information (Mesch & Talmund, 2010:46). The Internet consists, amongst others, of a network of cables, computers, data centres, servers, satellites, and Wi-Fi towers that enable digital information to be transferred worldwide (Sample, 2018). The Internet has inspired the creation of several emerging technologies, including social networking platforms for social media. Social media can be seen as Internet-based platforms that enable people to connect with one another (Carr & Hayes, 2015:20).

Bolton et al. (2013:248) note that social media use is increasing and changing at a fast rate. Access to information has become easy as social media has brought about the possibility of instant messages with people far away, which have not been easy before (Davel, 2017:33). As a result, there has been a shift from print media as a form of communication to social media which comes in a digital form (Whitehill et al., 2020:250). With this new discovery, youth from all walks of life and from all over the world are using social media (Kelly, Zilanawala, Booker & Sacker, 2018:59).

Social media use is mostly enabled through Social Networking Platforms/Sites (SNS). Various platforms emerged for accessing social media, including virtual reality sites, gaming, and social networking to connect to different applications (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:326; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:800). Social media platforms enable people to connect to others online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:63). These platforms allow users to share ideas and their opinions including their emotions without revealing their identity to the end user (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:49).

The shift from digital print to social media has made communication easy and allows people to communicate in real time (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Howell, 2012 in Hughes, 2018:20). The introduction of handheld mobile phones enhanced people's

ability to access social media platforms and increased its use (Kreutzer, 2009:1). The availability of social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, RSS, LinkedIn and WhatsApp make it easy for individuals to communicate with others within their private space (Hughes, 2018:8; Lindsay, 2011:1; Sajithra & Patil, 2013:73-74).

Social media has thus brought about a new way of communicating, both verbally and nonverbally (Lindsay, 2011:1). There has been an increase in interpersonal communication although individuals do not see each other, and some individuals who find it difficult to form face-to-face relationships find it easy to have friends whom they have not met or might not meet (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Oberst et al., 2017:51). The use of social media has afforded youth with a way of connection which brings about forming relationships, including meeting new friends and forming new friendships, and easy access to events (Brake & Safko, 2009:6; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram involve uploading text and images and sharing information and activities with friends and with the general public (Hughes, 2018:8-9).

Within the social dimension of social media self-presentation is presumed, as in their social contact people have a need to influence the perceptions that other people have of them (Viviani & Pasi, 2017:6). Self-representation occurs with the intention of influencing people for benefit (e.g., to leave a good impression on one's potential in-laws); it could also be motivated by a need to create an appearance that is compatible with one's personal identity (e.g., wearing a fashionable outfit to be perceived as young and trendy). In this respect, social media provides an opportunity for people to communicate hiding their identity, which opens opportunities for individuals to say whatever they feel like discussing without revealing their identity (Bryer & Zayattaro, 2011:327). On social media users can create a personal profile with a picture and identifying information, upload personal information, and change the content how and when they wish (Obar & Wildman, 2015:6-9). Social media offers a chance to stay in contact with family, friends, and colleagues, and to keep up to date with the latest news and changes in society (Carr & Hayes, 2015:48).

2.2.2 Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Social media and Information Communication Technology (ICT) are inseparable (Lindsay, 2011:13). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) encompass

the use of electronic technologies (e.g., smartphones, personal computers, tablets, radios, television) to receive and transmit information via the Internet. ICTs have become a part of people's lives and has changed their everyday behaviours (Oberst et al., 2017:51). Owing to the advancement of information technologies, which are interconnected through wireless and Internet communication that enable a world-wide network, information has become increasingly available and present in various ways, be they visual, textual, or audio, or a combination thereof. Access to knowledge is often made possible through websites such as social networking sites (SNS), sometimes referred to as Internet-enabled social media, and with technological devices such as smartphones, computers, Smart TVs, laptops, and tablets (Badri et al., 2017:2656; Moawad & Ebrahim, 2016:174; Shields-Nordness, 2015:1).

While there is no single, widely agreed concept of ICT, the term is commonly accepted to mean all computers, networking elements, software, and systems that, when combined, enable individuals and organisations (i.e., businesses, non-profit organisations, governments, and enterprises) to communicate in the digital world. ICTs offer benefits beyond what would have been comprehensible 30 years ago, for example, the development of social networking sites (SNS) that allow social interaction between users (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2). ICTs are now being used for commercial, social, and personal transactions and experiences. ICTs have fundamentally transformed the way people work, interact, study and live, and continue to revolutionise all aspects of human experiences now that computers and robots can carry out many of the activities that were once performed by humans.

The importance of ICTs for economic progress and market growth continues to be so immense that it is now credited with the introduction of what many call the Fourth Industrial Revolution. ICTs also underpin substantial changes in culture as, globally, people switch from intimate, face-to-face experiences to digital space interactions. This modern period is often referred to as the Digital Age (Livingstone et al., 2017:28).

2.3 THE PREVALENCE AND PURPOSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

As discussed above, social media use has become a common activity worldwide. In this section, the prevalence of social media use and different social media tools will be discussed. The effects of the shift to digital technology on the lives of children and adolescents stated by the World Health Organization (2020) is highlighted as follows

by Desai and Burton (2021/2022:113): “The fourth industrial revolution has increasingly blurred the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds, leading to dramatic shifts in daily life and changing the way children and adolescents live, socialise, move around and learn.”

2.3.1 The prevalence of social media use

The use of the Internet and social media is increasing worldwide and with specific reference to North America and Europe, children have online access in various ways and at a younger age (Bekalu et al., 2019:704; Borgström et al., 2019:129). North America is leading the worldwide use of social media (Hruska & Maresova, 2020:8). Adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 25 years have been found to be the largest proportion of active users of social media in the world (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:1; Sirola et al., 2021:19). Social media has become an ever-present part young people’s life (Gibson & Trnka, 2019:238). Goodyear (2020:48) and Goodyear, Armour and Wood (2019:674) add that young adults’ knowledge of online practices is way ahead of that of researchers and clinicians as they are more familiar with the online environment.

Internet availability has increased the use of social media and improves the lives of communities and society in general (Lindsay, 2011:1; Sajithra & Patil, 2013:69). In recent years, South African youth aged between 15 and 24 years has adopted technology and gained access to mobile phones and social networking, earning itself the name “mobile generation” (Beger & Sinha, 2012:3). It is estimated that about 54% of the South African population use the internet, thus in 2019 around 31 million individuals had access to the internet (Businessstech, 2019:79). It was further reported that more than five million South Africans were active users of the internet on a regular basis.

2.3.2 The purpose of social media use

Social media are being used for various purposes. Adolescents and young adults most commonly use various forms of online media for social connections, distraction, entertainment, and creativity (Merrill & Jiang, 2019:1). Classification of software for social media groups is incorporated into more specific categories, e.g., community projects, blogs, content communities, social networking platforms/sites, interactive gaming environments, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:62)

2.3.2.1 Social networking platforms/sites (SNS)

Social networking sites (SNS) are mobile web applications that allow users to connect with others by creating personal online profiles, inviting others such as friends, relatives and colleagues to connect with them on their profiles, and sending one another instant messages and e-mails (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:59). Personal accounts can contain any form of content, such as images, videos, audio files, and blogs. Facebook has become the dominant social networking platform in terms of user numbers (Reid Chassiakos, Radesky, Christakis, Moreno & Cross, 2016:e3; Roos, 2012:382).

Facebook allows users to see posts from their own friends on the user's newsfeed (Hall, 2016:166). Users on Facebook can create profiles that is inclusive of personal information as well as added contacts to build social networks so that persons who visit the Facebook page are able to cross to those websites and interact with other users (Roos, 2012:385). Facebook further allows the user to know that the other user is thinking of them by "poking" them and they can send each other gifts (Roos, 2012:385). "Facebook messenger" is another feature on Facebook that allows users to communicate directly (one-on-one) with other users (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:2).

Social networking sites such as Facebook are of such popularity, especially among younger Internet users, that the term "Facebook addiction" is used to describe people's preoccupation with this platform (Rajesh & Rangaiah, 2020:1). Research done by Businesstech (2019:79) indicates that the number of individuals using Facebook reached 23 million (53%), followed by LinkedIn (18%), Instagram (9%), Twitter (4%) and Snapchat (3%). Aichner and Jacob (2015:257) reported that, globally, Facebook already had 1.19 billion active users each month by January 2014 and this number was expected to increase by 18% every year.

2.3.2.2 Collaborative projects

Collaborative projects allow the production of content by multiple end-users jointly and simultaneously and are, in this context, potentially the most democratic way of creating user-generated content (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:62). Within collaborative projects a distinction is made between wikis and social bookmarking applications. Wikis are websites where the users are allowed to add, delete, and alter text-based

material, as in the example of Wikipedia. Social bookmarking applications refer to group-based collection and rating of media content or Internet links, as in the example of the web service Delicious (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:62).

The main concept behind collaborative projects is that the collective initiative of multiple actors leads to a greater result than what any participant might achieve individually. From the point of view of the user, one must be mindful that collaborative projects appear to become the primary source of knowledge for many users. While not everything posted on Wikipedia may really be accurate, more and more Internet users assume that it is true (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:62). For example, when Amazon - the online book retailer - began exploring the concept of dynamic pricing, comments suggesting that such a strategy was unjust were immediately seen under the Wikipedia entry on "time-based pricing." Still, collaborative projects present unique opportunities for the user community (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2014:617). Nokia, for example, uses internal wikis to update workers on project status and trade suggestions, which are widely used by many of their staff members (Yamak, Saunier & Vercoeter, 2016:956).

2.3.2.3 Blogs

Blogs represent the earliest version of social media and are unique website types that typically show entries that are date-stamped in a reverse chronological order (Hoang, McCall, Dixon, Fitzgerald & Gaillard, 2015:761; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:62). Blogs are social media alternatives to personal websites and may come in a variety of forms, from personal diaries of the author's life to summaries of all content that are relevant to single themes or subject fields (Thevenot, 2007:288). Blogs are typically managed by only one person, but provide opportunities to interact with others by posting comments (Hoang et al., 2015:760). Because of how blogs started out, text-based blogs are the most popular by far. Blogs, however, have since started to take on new media types; for example, some TV network stations allow users to broadcast images from their webcam to other users in real time.

Companies use blogs to inform staff, consumers, and shareholders on innovations they deem to be relevant as well as to enhance the company's transparency. However, blogs do have inherent risks, as is prevalent in collaborative projects. First, customers who are not happy with or are frustrated with a company's services may post their

grievances in the form of blogs; thereby putting potentially harmful information in the public online space. Secondly, once companies allow workers to be involved in blogging, they will need to deal with the implications of staff posting negative comments about the company (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61).

2.3.2.4 Content communities

Content communities focus on distributing media content among people. Content communities entail a wide array of media forms that can include text (e.g., BookCrossing where books are shared), videos (e.g., YouTube), images (e.g., Flickr), and PowerPoint presentations such as Slideshare (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:60). Content community members are not expected to build a personal profile page and, if they do, they typically present non-personal information only, for example the number of posts or the date they joined the community (Du Plessis, 2017:4-5; Noguti, 2016:696).

From a business point of view, content communities are a risk as probable forums for the distribution of copyright-protected products. Although prominent content communities have policies to prohibit and delete such unauthorised content, it is impossible to prevent risky content from being posted online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61).

2.3.2.5 Virtual game worlds

Virtual Game Worlds or Virtual worlds for short, are platforms that reproduce a three-dimensional setting whereby players will appear in the form of customised avatars and communicate with each other as if in real life (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61). In this way, virtual worlds are potentially the greatest symbol of social media use since they offer the highest degree of social involvement and richness of media. Virtual worlds are available in two forms, namely massively multiple online role-playing games and virtual social worlds.

Massively multiple online role-playing games (MMORPG) are video games “designed in ways that promote sociability, communication and collaboration amongst players pursuing missions (quests) in the environment” (Sourmelis, Ioannou & Zaphiris, 2017:42). These virtual worlds are popular for use with standard game consoles (e.g., Sony's PlayStation and Microsoft's X-Box) and allow multiple users over the world to

play simultaneously (Kaplan & Haenlin, 2010:64). Users must comply with strict rules. Some virtual game worlds, for example cod-medieval “World of Warcraft” and Sony’s EverQuest, set rules in such a way that the presentation and disclosure of users is not a necessity. Some people spend so much time engaging in virtual game worlds that their character, whether a sorcerer or ninja, begins to show resemblance to their real-life personality.

Virtual social worlds permit users to more freely select their actions and live a “virtual life” that is similar or close to their actual life (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:64). As in the virtual game worlds, users or “residents” of virtual social worlds adopt the roles of avatars and engage in a three-dimensional virtual setting; however, with no rules for controlling user interactions apart from basic physical laws, for example gravity. This allows users endless strategies for self-presentation that, with frequent use, result in behaviour which closely mirrors that witnessed in real life environments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:64).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:64) described the most famous example of virtual social world at that time as the Second Life application. In this ‘life’ users can do everything that they can do in real life, for example taking a walk and enjoying the virtual sunshine. They can also build content such as designing virtual clothes or furniture which they can sell for a virtual currency. This currency can be traded on the Second Life Exchange, which becomes an additional income to their real-life income (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:64). It is evident that virtual worlds can lead to addiction to the Internet.

2.4 ADOLESCENTS’ SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The phenomenon of social media has not left adolescents out of the picture. Every year there is an increase in the number of adolescents who use social media (Salomon & Brown 2018:539). The most users of online social networking are young adults and adolescents, and each year social media use among adolescents continues to increase (Raju, Valsaraj & Noronha, 2015:80; Reid & Weigle, 2014:73; Salomon & Brown, 2018:539). One of the most favoured leisure time activities amongst adolescents is social media use (Buda et al., 2020:1031). Social media have thus become integrated in the daily lives of many adolescents (Boer et al., 2020:1).

Adolescents’ use of smartphones has made social media easily accessible to them (Merrill & Liang, 2019:1). According to Hawk et al. (2019:65), most people who use

social media are youth since they possess smartphones and can access the internet at different places, including their schools and hot spots in shopping malls. They use their smartphones to communicate with friends and family using instant messages. In this way, social media simplify lives as it is seen as an easily accessible communication platform among the youth (Bányai, Zsila, Király, Maraz, Elekes, Griffiths, Andreassen & Demetrovics, 2017:1; O’Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011:800). Davel (2017:32) states that as early as preadolescence, the use of internet is widespread, which continues through adolescence. Online social networking is inexpensive or free, easy to use and has become the latest virtual communication method (Raju et al., 2015:82).

In research conducted by Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2019:189) students were asked to report the number of hours they spend per day browsing or posting on social media, and their concluding results were that the adolescents should limit their social media use to not more than two hours per day. The research findings of a study by Sigmund, Sigmundová, Badura, Kalman, Hamrik and Pavelka (2015:11859) on physical activity and screen time among Czech adolescents from 2002 to 2014 show that the amount of time spent online as reported by the participants was alarmingly high and a cause for concern. Another study by Cerruti, Spensieri, Presaghi, Valastro, Fontana and Guidetti (2017:380) found that adolescents spend an enormous amount of time engaged in Internet technologies. Participants in a research study conducted by Salomon and Brown (2018:552) reported using social media on average four to six hours each week. In the research by Cipolleta, Malighetti, Cenedese and Spoto (2020:5) participants reported using Instagram daily, with girls spending an average of 3.21 hours a day and boys 1.6 hours a day online. Participants in a study by Sampasa-Kanyisa et al. (2019:193) reported spending between one hour to more than seven hours a day on social media. Strasburger, Jordan and Donnerstein (2010 in Merrill and Liang (2019:1) report that, given that youth can access social media in different places, even in their bedrooms, many young people spend around seven hours per day on the Internet, which amounts to almost a full ‘workday’.

Within the adolescent life stage in which identity formation occurs, it often happens that adolescents try to create a false online identity on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Oberts et al., 2017:52). Bryant (2018:2) adds that adolescence is an important and a vulnerable stage as adolescents

start to form their identity and establish important relationships, and that social media use can have a substantial influence on this area of their development. Teenagers create their online profiles and take videos of themselves as they find it appealing as they wish to see themselves fitting into the wider world. Social comparison is perceived as an aspect of social networking sites that is pertinent to adolescents and Spies Shapiro and Margolin (2014:1-2) found that most adolescents in their study start and finish their day by viewing posts on their social networking sites. A study by Boer et al. (2021:8) found that adolescents experienced lower life satisfaction and an increase in depressive symptoms because of social media use, related to an increase in social comparisons and cybervictimisation.

When adolescents become more independent of their parents, they tend to prefer to privately chat online without their parents knowing (Barth, 2015:204). SNS provide ample opportunities for teenagers to communicate on their own without adult supervision (Oberst et al., 2017:52). This secrecy makes parents not to be aware of their children's online activities. It may occur that information shared online is false, different to the adolescents' real life, and done to impress others or frustrate others with the aim of gaining popularity. In addition, sharing private and sensitive information could turn out to be dangerous because it can expose adolescents to online victimisation, which may lead to suicide (Davel, 2017:20; Pew Research Study, 2013 in Barth, 2015:204).

It is a known fact that social media has become a contemporary culture among young people, therefore, parents and guardians are advised to closely monitor the use of social media especially where internet access is freely available (Badri et al., 2017:2658; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:4). However, there is the aspect of the generational gap which cannot be ignored as some parents do not know how to monitor which online sites have been visited by their children (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Adolescents often have more advanced knowledge of the use of technology and can even protect their information with passwords that can be difficult for parents to trace (Glover & Fitch, 2018:176). This gap in knowledge and skills leaves many parents in a situation where they cannot monitor their adolescent children's online activities (Louw & Louw, 2014:375).

Social media can provide adolescents with a distinct safe space in which they can

openly talk about distress (Gibson & Trnka, 2020:243; Goodyear et al., 2018:8). However, spending extensive amounts of time using social media can affect adolescents' healthy growth within a life stage characterised by rapid growth, thereby negatively affecting their health (Crone & Konijn, 2018:1; Louw & Louw, 2014:374). Furthermore, teenagers may spend time on social media when they are supposed to be doing schoolwork (Glover and Fitch, 2018:172). The negative use of social media could be ascribed to the availability of smartphones coupled with social networking sites which include video games (Oberst et al., 2017:51).

2.5 LEGISLATION RELATED TO SOCIAL MEDIA

In the 1980s, privately managed Internet service providers emerged). In addition, the development of the World Wide Web resulted in the growth in the use of the Internet in the 1990s (Roos, 2012:380-381). Adolescents as the most dedicated users of social network sites probably lack the full understanding of the privacy risks that comes with SNS usage (Roos, 2012:401). The new technological developments that take place in every era challenges the law and prompt the development of new laws that will facilitate positive online human engagement (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:2; Roos, 2012:375).

The development of personal computers and communication networks contributed to the need for privacy and data protection laws. This is because after the initial use of computers by government and large businesses such as banks and data stored on a handful of stand-alone computers called mainframes, the development of personal computers allowed more users to communicate via networks, including the Internet, and have access to extensive range of personal information shared online (Roos, 2012:380). The advance in technology increased concerns by users who feel that their privacy is under threat, which resulted in perceptions that the internet creates challenges for its users (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:1-2).

Nyoni and Velempini (2015) and Roos (2012) discuss the challenges related to privacy with reference to Facebook. Facebook as the most popular social network service in South Africa sells advertisements to fund the service and it is therefore important to the seller that the user provides as much personal information as possible (Roos, 2012:382-383). This then permits Facebook to allow the users to create a personal profile and, although Facebook privacy settings have advanced, privacy becomes a

concern when the user discloses personal information on their webpage (Roos, 2012:385-386). A study by Nyoni and Velempini (2015:8) found that first time users of Facebook may not have knowledge of this aspect and are not aware that they must set their profiles to private when they register. This is concerning as Lockhat (2021:71) shares that most social media platforms give permission to the sharing of the user's personal information without their consent.

Even though users are not obliged to provide their real names, Facebook encourages the use of real names and studies have revealed that users tend to use their real names and an identifiable profile picture (Roos, 2012:386). Unfortunately, it is easier for those with bad intentions to access sensitive information on Facebook (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:8). Facebook is indexed by Google, meaning that even though the user has set the setting to "friends only" they are still traceable by their username, and anyone would be able to see their profile picture if it is provided (Roos, 2012:387). This regrettably comes with the risk that the information shared may be used for unintended purposes (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:1). Lockhat (2021:71) advises that it is important for the users to make sure that privacy measures are applied when signing in on social media platforms, that they are cautious about what they share, and keep their identity hidden.

The users of Facebook do not necessarily understand what information is saved about the users and how this information is used (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:1). It is recommended that teenagers be educated on this aspect and the matter be prioritised (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:9; Roos, 2012:401). The mere referral of users to the privacy policy is not enough because most users do not read privacy policies and teenagers should be made aware that their private conversations are not as private as they think (Lockhat, 2021:71; Roos, 2012:401-402). Social network abuse is possible due to the high level of trust that users place in these sites (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:8).

In order to regulate the processing of personal data information, data protection laws were being developed to achieve this objective (Roos, 2012:379). A new Act was signed in South Africa on 26th November 2013 and is officially known as the Protection of Personal Information Act (PoPI) (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:4). The main purpose of the PoPI Act is to protect user privacy and personal information processed by the public and private sector (Lockhat, 2021:69; Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:2). The core

principles of the PoPI Act stipulate that the processing of personal information must be reasonable and in line with the guidelines set out in the Act (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:4). Although the PoPI Act defends the rights and privacy of users, users are not aware of the Act and this could be attributed to their lack of interest or failure to understand what it involves (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:8). In addition, Nyoni and Velempini (2015:9) warn that laws are mostly reactive rather than being proactive. The PoPI Act came into effect on the 1 July 2021 even though it was signed in November 2013 (Lockhat, 2021:69).

South African legislation is also in place to protect social media users against cyberbullying. Within the technological environment cyberbullying is rapidly increasing and experts believe it is more detrimental than 'traditional' bullying (Du Preez, 2012:779). Reyneke and Jacobs (2018:67) believe that there are various measures to deal with cyberbullying and parents, children and teachers should be aware of the possibility of seeking legal intervention. Popovac and Leoschut (2012:13) highlight the Films and Publications Act (No. 65 of 1996) in South Africa as one of many government policies and acts aimed at the protection of children against exposure to harmful media content. The Act aims to regulate the creation, production, possession, distribution and the broadcasting of films and interactive computer games (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13).

In the South African legal framework, no explicit reference to bullying is limited to one Act, and multiple documents provide the basis for legal action (Du Preez, 2012:783; Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018:69;). The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996), the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996), the Child Justice Act 75 of 2008, the Children's Act 38 of 2005, the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011 and the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 are documents that form the foundation for legal action in cases of bullying (Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018:69-74). There is no definition for cyberbullying in the South African law and the Acts that are a foundation for legal response to cyberbullying are applicable equally to both children and adults (Du Preez, 2018:783). However, in matters involving children as perpetrators, the Child Justice Act 75 of 2008 determines additional considerations to be considered for children in conflict with the law (Du Preez, 2018:784; Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018:74).

Desai and Burton (2021/2022:116) refer to The White Paper on Audio and Audio-visual Content Services, that provides “a framework to protect children from harmful and exploitative marketing practices by commercial enterprises.” The Department of Basic Education also has Guidelines on E-safety in schools. Desai and Burton (2021/2022:116) suggest that, even though the Guidelines have been revised, it must be revisited to focus on aspects such as potential issues and risks involved for children and schools, and best practices to address these aspects.

Du Preez (2018:78) notes that any person who makes offensive comments to third parties on social networking sites, in emails, text messages or instant messages could be found guilty of criminal defamation. In addition, anyone who communicates messages to a third party that directly or indirectly invite or suggest acts of improper sexual nature, violates the dignity of the other person and is guilty of *crimen injuria* (Du Preez, 2018:784). The person on the receiving end of the bullying may apply for a protection order as stipulated in the Protection of Harassment Bill 1 of 2010 at any magistrate’s court (Du Preez, 2018:784; Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018:76). The victim may also institute a civil claim against the bully for defamation (Du Preez, 2018:784).

The risks and negative long-term repercussions that comes with sharing private information and any other information added on the profile on Facebook should be communicated to teenagers (Roos, 2012:402). It was reported in a study by Nyoni and Velempini (2015:8) that users were exposed to different kinds of online privacy violations such as unwanted attention, people writing on their ‘walls’, insults, abuse, or being tagged in questionable photographs that may result in the user being perceived in the negative manner. Their research further found that users continue to share personal and sensitive information on their online profiles, which can be used to establish their location, movements, and activities by those who are interested in doing so (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:9).

Despite efforts to protect people from harmful effects thereof, the use of social media can still expose adolescents to risks, as indicated above. As social media are considered as a techno-subsystem that is part of the microsystem (Johnson & Puplampu, 2008:4), the potential impact of social media use on adolescents, whether positive or negative, cannot be ignored.

2.6 THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON ADOLESCENTS

Studies by authors such as Anderson and Jiang (2018:5) and Hendricks and Kanjiri (2021:2) indicate that the use of social media can have both positive and negative influences on teenagers. As mentioned by Desai and Burton (2021/2022:120): “Growing up in a digital world has offered children opportunities as well as exposure to risk.” Interestingly, Hausmann, Touloumtzis, White, Colbert and Gooding (2017:715) found that although there are recorded disadvantages of the use of social media amongst adolescents, there have been more advantages of social media use, including information sharing and solving challenges pertaining to their schoolwork. Adolescents also use social media to give and receive support from one another and talk about their distress (Gibson & Trnka, 2020:240-241).

However, Bolton et al. (2013:253) note that social media use can have negative effects on the psychological, emotional, physical, and social development and well-being of adolescents. Increasing the risk of social media use by adolescents is the fact that the information and content contained in social media can be misleading and harmful (Sirola et al., 2021:2). On the other hand, Mason, Tucci and Benefield (2017:5) suggest that the risks that adolescents are exposed to when they are online such as bullying, exposure to sexually explicit content, child sexual abuse, and identity theft, are risks that they are already exposed to offline.

With reference to the work by EU Kids Online (2021), Desai and Burton (2021/2022:113-114) classify online risks and opportunities into four categories, namely content, contact, conduct and contract:

- Positive content or opportunities include educational material, support, or mental health information. Risks include violent, pornographic or hateful content, or false and misleading information (“fake news”).
- Contact refers to whether the child actively participates in online encounters. Positive contact can include online counselling, while risks include children being targeted, for example through harassment or grooming.
- Conduct refers to the child’s online interactions with peers, which can be positive through aspects such as social inclusion and positive expression; or harmful through activities such as online bullying or hateful speech.

- Contract refers to be a participant in the digital market. Opportunities can be gained for accessing organisations that provide mental health services, while risks include identity theft or marketing that is not age appropriate.

Although many adolescents are careful users of and contributors to social media, adults can support them to engage positively with social media to their benefit (Goodyear, 2020:49). Thus, there should be monitoring by adult persons to avoid adolescents from derailing from a positive course of social media use (Hawk et al., 2019:65). Goodyear (2020:49) suggests that special attention be given to digital literacy for adults to help them evaluate the content and navigate digital mediums and offer support to adolescents through digital skills development.

Research by the Pew Research Centre in the USA revealed that there is no agreement among adolescents on the effects of social media use. Accordingly, around 31% of the adolescent participants had positive attitudes towards social media whereas 24% indicated that social media use has negative impacts, and almost 45% were indecisive on the matter (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:5). Experimentation, curiosity, and impulsiveness are developmental traits of adolescents that increase their risk of being both victims and perpetrators with their increased presence on social media (Mason et al., 2017:2). Thus, it is recognised that there is a downside to the use of social media as it may affect adolescents' well-being in different spheres of life (*cf.* Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Hawk et al., 2019:65), as will be discussed next.

2.6.1 Mental health effects

Findings in the literature show that social media use can have positive effects on adolescents' mental well-being. South African children can benefit from supportive and mental health services and information, especially in contexts where there are limited resources or services, or in instances where children may feel uncomfortable or threatened by seeking help (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:114). Some adolescents can thus benefit emotionally by using online care, more than when they are engaged in face-to-face interventions (Barth, 2015:203-204). For example, SNS may be an important tool for marginalised groups such as LGBTQ youth to communicate with each other despite the physical distance between them (Glover & Fitch, 2018:176). Adolescents can also use social media to get in touch with other adolescents who are suffering from similar illnesses or medical issues. They can be educated about their

illness and be comforted by taking part in support groups and awareness programmes (Reid & Weigle, 2014:74).

Research indicates that both positive and negative emotional states can be transferred through social media, referred to as ‘emotional contagion’ (Kramer et al., 2014 in Hausman et al., 2017:717). Barth (2015:201) highlights a consistent finding on the impact of technology, namely that “technology seems to amplify emotions not only in adolescents, but also in adults.” Despite the positive attributes of the use of social media, there is a negative side, namely that social media use can have detrimental effects on people’s psychological health (Beranuy, Oberst, Carbonell & Chamarro, 2009:1182). In the literature a strong focus is found on the harmful effects of social media use on adolescents’ mental health.

Psychiatric disorder symptoms such as depression, anxiety, stress, ADHD, and OCD were found to be related to problematic social media use (Hussain & Griffiths, 2018:6). These findings are supported by a study by Paakkari et al. (2021:1) that confirm a relationship between problematic social media use and negative mental health outcomes in adolescents. An earlier study in Scotland reveal that adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17 tend to put an emotional investment in social media and that their social media use mostly during the night was associated with high levels of anxiety, depression, inability to sleep and low self-esteem (Woods & Scott, 2016:45).

- **Anxiety and depression**

According to Paakkari et al. (2021:1) there has been an increase in the past decade in research on problematic social media use or social media addiction among adolescents. In cases where adolescents are unable to exercise self-control as a way of limiting their social media use, they are at risk of developing internet addiction and mental health issues (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). Mahamid and Berte (2018:103) define addiction as “craving, diminished recognition of the significance of problem behaviours and interpersonal relationships and deregulated emotional state.” It was found that preadolescents who had controlled access to social media through parents who limited the time they spend on social media, have better mental health than those who do not have their time on social media limited by their parents (Fardouly et al., 2018:1465). The most measured consequence of social media use in young adults is depression (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020:88).

The engagement of social media users with harmful content while they are online can be linked with mental health issues (Fardouly et al., 2018:1457). Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian and Haliwell (2015:38), for example, found a relationship between the mood and body image of young women and girls engaging in social media. As they are exposed to thin bodies, they end up thinking this is the ideal and failure to maintain such bodies lead them to feel worthless and meaningless and may end in suicide due to depression and anxiety that they experience (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:3; Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Holmgren & Stockdale, 2018:897; Kelly et al., 2018:66).

For example, young people who regularly share photographs of themselves ('selfies') may seem superficial, but this practise has evolved as a common trend in younger users of social networks (McCrae, Gettings & Purssell, 2017:317). Negative content which are shared online can put adolescents at higher risk of developing low self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2018:60). The pressure brought about by comparing oneself with others can cause problems in adolescents' lives. Online content is often shared without scrutiny, which leads to personal embarrassment and deep emotional harm that are hard to be reversed due to the reputational damage caused and the lack of control of what should be sent and what should not be sent; increasing the chance of suicide (Kelly et al., 2018:59; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801).

- **Cyberbullying**

Adolescents may also become victims of cyberbullying by perpetrators who are often known to victims (Mason et al., 2017:4-5). Cyberbullying is described as behaviour that is intentionally aimed at harming others while hiding behind technology and may take different forms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010:207). Communicating false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person are ways of committing cyberbullying and is a peer-to-peer risk (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). Other forms of cyberbullying include spreading rumors, sending hate messages, creating negative profiles, webpages, or videos, and sending malicious or threatening messages (Mason et al., 2017:4; Reid & Weigle, 2014:75). It is unfortunate that cyberbullying, unlike face-to-face bullying, is more difficult to be controlled or observed by teachers and parents (Reid & Weigle, 2014:76).

Cyberbullying can severely harm the adolescent's development and well-being (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13). The difference between face-to-face bullying and

cyberbullying is that cyberbullying spreads fast and beyond the place of the incident (Bryant, 2018:19; Reid & Weigle, 2014:76). The adolescent cannot escape the bullying as it widely shown on multiple devices and even those who did not witness the bullying incident personally still get to see it online (Bryant, 2018:19; Reid & Weigle, 2014:76). Adolescents may experience problems such as anxiety, insecurity, depression, panic attacks, aggression, lower self-esteem, poor academic performance, as well as high truancy and school drop-out rates and in extreme cases, substance misuse, antisocial behavioural disorders, and suicide (Bryant, 2018:19; Reyneke & Jacobs, 2018:66-67). Unfortunately, support that is offered online may not serve the purpose as it may create an opportunity for further cyberbullying (Barth, 2015:204). Cyberbullying may be inflicted by people known to the users or those whom they met online (Mason et al., 2017:4).

Cyberbullying in its own is becoming separate field of research that has been extensively studied (Mason et al., 2017:4). This is much needed as mental health professionals working with adolescents regularly have patients who have experienced online bullying and suffer the negative psychological effects thereof (Reid & Weigle, 2014:75). Sadly, with cyberbullying the perpetrators can remain anonymous to some extent (Reid & Weigle, 2014:75).

- **Suicide risk**

Suicide narratives posted online have raised concerns about the potential for a "contagion impact" among adolescents. Many accounts of teen suicide are shared on the Internet, where they may be found on message boards, social networking sites, and blogs. Social media is becoming a common way for adolescents to learn about the suicidal thoughts of their peers and close friends. Adolescent suicide ideation and behaviour may be exacerbated by stories like these. Researchers are concerned about the likelihood of a direct link between exposure to internet suicide reports and suicidal thoughts or actions (Reid & Weigle, 2014:77). A study by O'Reilly et al. (2018:20) show that participants' depression and suicidal ideation were mental illnesses directly caused by social media use. The risk of suicide among adolescents and social media users is increased by "Net suicide"; a term used to refer to prearranged suicide by people who only met online but have never met face-to-face and group suicides that are planned using suicide websites (Reid & Weigle, 2014:77).

Thus, the psychological harm that comes from the use of social media is not only real but can be detrimental depending on the person's unique circumstances (Bryant, 2018:18).

2.6.2 Social effects

As mentioned earlier, the use of social media does not only have the negative outcomes; there are also positive outcomes that benefit adolescents. Social support is a central component of the association between social media use and mental health. Social media sites have become a social environment where the opportunity exists to connect with friends, classmates, and others who similar interests as those of adolescents (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14).

- **Social connection and support**

Adolescents gain independence from their parents and by sharing their experiences with peers on a similar developmental level, they learn from each other and receive peer support (Davel, 2017:64; Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013:58-59). Accordingly, research indicates that adolescents use instant messages to share emotional distress with each other and that some adolescents who have considered suicide did not go as far after they have shared it with and received support from their peers (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013:61). This is supported by Undiyaundeye (2014:14) who states that the internet has emerged as a new social environment where adolescents explore matters of mutual concern.

The online environment provides adolescents with opportunities to connect with others and to socialise with peers. Hendricks and Kanjiri (2021:11) found that Facebook as a social media platform is used by the youth to socialise and keep contact with family members and friends who are staying far from them in rural areas. Social media can furthermore help adolescents keep in touch with family members who are not staying with them and bridge the gap created by distance (Shields-Nordness, 2015:45). Through social media parents can immediately communicate with their children and stay connected to them regardless of their whereabouts (Shields-Nordness, 2015:42).

- **Collective action**

One manifestation of the need to form connections and relationships with peers, is the phenomenon of online collective action. Collective action is an outcome of

adolescents' increased use of social media (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy & Inghis, 2013:886). In their study, Seo et al. (2013:897) found that the need to form friendships with peers and maintain such relationships were linked with the adolescent's participation in flash mobs. Seo et al. (2013:886) define a flash mob as "a form of collective action that has been organised mainly via social media or mobile devices." Using social media, adolescents are likely to join groups that portray aspects of their self-identity, and these connections intensify self-identity while simultaneously increasing feelings of belongingness, affiliation, and group identity (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:5). Adolescents with a high sense of self-efficacy reported having the desire to participate in flash mobs (Seo et al., 2013:897).

- **Enhancing prosocial skills**

Social cognitive theory states that people can learn prosocial skills through observation and copying positive behaviours, and through positive reinforcement (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8), implying that it is possible for adolescents to model positive behaviour observed through social media. Young people become more socially skilled and informed through the assistance of social networking sites allowing them to communicate, share information and create web content (Akram & Kumar, 2017:347). In addition, social media platforms allow adolescents to be in control of whom they interact and socialise with, and some adolescents are using this to their advantage by taking ownership of their online social circle (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:10).

- **Social isolation**

Social media does not only have the potential to promote intimacy, but it may also promote social isolation (Shields-Nordness, 2015:3). Undiyaundeye (2014:15) warns that the online manner of socialising, if done excessively, deprives children of the opportunity to experience real life interaction with friends and family, while it also limits children's opportunities for learning social skills. Shields-Nordness (2015:12) adds that depression, social phobia, and anxiety may develop as social media may encourage social media users to withdraw into isolation. The most disadvantaged adolescents in this respect are those who are marginalised as they may not have opportunity to find face-to-face measures of support (Barth, 2015:206; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Weinstein & Davis, 2015:932).

- **Social comparison and a false identity**

As adolescents socialise more with their peers, they are more likely to begin to compare themselves with their peers thus increasing the onset of depression (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:1). Poor mental health has been linked to engaging in comparisons with other users on social media (Fardouly et al., 2018:1464). Symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychological distress are greatly influenced social comparison on social media (Keles et al., 2020:87-89). A constant comparison with their peers does not only increase the development of depression but it can also cause harm to the formation of a personal identity (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8).

Facebook allows adolescents to compare themselves with others by looking through their newsfeeds, photos, or posts on the profile page (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:10). The constant need for social comparison can lead to the prevalence of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), depression and anxiety (Hughes, 2018:35; Moreno & Uhls, 2019:5). Furthermore, adolescents who experience FOMO engage on multiple social media platforms and become habitual users. Fardouly et al. (2018:1456) report that more time spent on social media and making online comparisons may lead to the onset of mental health problems. Adolescents' self-perception can be greatly influenced by social comparison online and their self-esteem become linked to positive and negative feedback in relation to their online profile (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:12). Concerning, is that adolescents are under pressure to create a fake lifestyle that is not close to their reality to impress their peers, dress up like celebrities and pose to be in the middle-class (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). When this false reality that they have created does not yield the expected results, they may begin to experience feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem.

- **Personal safety**

Another social effect of social media use relates to personal safety. The safety of adolescents in terms of social media use is a concern of parents and they worry about the possibility of adolescents being victimised online by strangers or harassed by their peers (George & Odgers, 2015:6). The mentioned authors explain that the concern over cyberbullying is that the perpetrators can remain anonymous and have access to their children any time of the day. When information such as a person's location is posted on Facebook it can be misused by third a party who can use this information

to track the movements of the user and their patterns and, for example, use the information to break into their home in their absence (Nyoni & Velempini, 2018:4). Nyoni and Velempini (2018:5) found that Facebook users are sharing private information without being aware that the information is made available in the public domain and is easily accessible. These findings confirm the increased risk of being harmed by strangers because of social media use. Adolescents use the Internet to engage with their friends and fulfil their leisure needs and use their mobile phone to meet new people, which leads to an increasing concern about online safety (Dzoro et al., 2019:94; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:333).

- **The risk of sexual grooming**

Some adults prey on children and use mobile phones to sexually groom children. Wurtele and Kenny (2016:333) conducted research on the use of digital technology by adults for sexual solicitation of youth and how this can be prevented. They define technology-facilitated sexual solicitation as including “sexual talk/texting, sending or soliciting sexual images, or engaging in cybersex (e.g., explicit sexual talk, disrobing or masturbating)” (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:333). Adolescent social media users are also at risk of e-grooming, which Wurtele and Kenny (2016:336) describe as action that “typically begins with establishing a friendship and/or relationship by expressing enjoyment of similar interests and activities, making the adolescent feel ‘special’ through compliments and flattery, or by sympathising with the adolescent’s concerns or frustration.” Therefore, certain online behaviours increase adolescents’ risk of online sexual solicitation, and it has been found that adolescents who are experiencing challenges offline are at higher risk of online solicitation (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:334-335).

- **Exposure to pornography**

The growth of the Internet has come with a simultaneous growth in the posting of highly explicit pictures (Mason et al., 2017:4). The use of pornography or teenage pornography is rife in the social media; therefore, teenagers are confronted with information that may be harmful and disturbing to them. The adolescents may also be asked by strangers to send nude pictures and at the end they may be blackmailed by these strangers, which many result in the adolescent committing suicide (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The difficulty that comes with online pornography, also

called cyberporn, is that the necessary filters such parental blocks are not available since the pornographic material is freely accessible to all who have access to an internet connection (Mason et al., 2017:4).

- **Effects on family dynamics**

The use of smartphones and social media is causing changes in family dynamics (Shields-Nordness, 2015:42). If used excessively, social media use prevents family interactions and can negatively affect family bonds (Undiyaundeye, 2014:15). Furthermore, social media has been a culprit when it comes to disrupting family lives as it leads to conflict between parents and their children and between siblings because adolescents may ignore house chores and isolate themselves in their rooms while chatting to friends. As adolescents' social media use cause them to pay less attention to family activities, it may contribute to family conflict (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:3). The effects of adolescents' social media use on the family reflect its influence on the home environment, which is described as the child's most important microsystem (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:313).

Although parents provide data and gadgets that adolescents use to access social media, they often have limited information about their children's internet use patterns and the kind of risks that come with the child's online exposure (Dzoro et al., 2019:94). To lower the negative effects of social media use on adolescents and their families, Undiyaundeye (2014:14) suggests that parents and adults should be actively involved with their children when children start to use the Internet and social media. Undiyaundeye (2014:15) adds that it may help parents to be conscious of the behavioural advertisements on social media sites used by their adolescent children as these advertisements function by collecting information on the person using the site.

Parents and guardians may struggle to understand young people's use of social media and it is recommended that digital literacy skills development should be an area of focus among adults (Goodyear et al., 2018:9). Although many parents use digital technology and understand online programmes used by their children, some parents are less informed on the use of technology (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). These parents may lack the technological literacy required to keep up with what their children are doing online (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13; Undiyaundeye, 2014:14).

It is also important that adolescents be educated on the possible risks of social media

use. It is recommended that educational information regarding safe internet use and possible risk of being solicited online be included on social media sites (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:338). Popovac and Leoschut (2012:13) suggest that collaboration between parents and schools can contribute to adolescents' online safety.

2.6.3 Cognitive/intellectual effects

Significant cognitive changes take place during the adolescent developmental stage and important developmental tasks can be supported through interactions on social media (Throuvala, Griffiths, Rennoldson & Kuss, 2019:173). The use of social media for educational purposes is fast increasing as technology is integrated into the education system and daily lives of adolescents. Social networking sites have changed the earlier norm where people waited for formal communication structures such as television to get news updates. Updated news and other information from all over the world can be accessed and tracked via social networking sites (Akram & Kumar, 2017:347; Moreno & Uhls, 2019:4).

Bryant (2018:14) mentions that there is however limited research on academic achievement and social media usage by adolescents compared to the numerous studies related to college students. Bryant (2018:4-5) views the possible cause for this situation as that children get exposed to social media at an early age and ethical considerations may be the cause of limited research. There has been a greater research focus on the effects of social media use on adolescents' psychological well-being than on their academic achievement and this could be due to the increased access to social media that only occurred in recent years (Bryant, 2018:13).

- **Educational benefits**

Social media is associated with many advantages in terms of adolescents' cognitive and academic development. Firstly, social media allows for easy sharing of knowledge as students can easily access and share information related to their studies (Akram & Kumar, 2017:350). Social media creates an opportunity for adolescents to learn from one another about matters pertaining to their schoolwork, and the use of virtual classrooms to do so aids collaboration on projects (Mazman & Usluel, 2011:133; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Reading posts by others and daily engagement with online newspapers is an aspect of learning from social media content which promotes reading and creativity (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson,

2011:801). Social media sites such as blogs, chat rooms and message boards such as sites for news and movies, can support reading, writing and critical thinking skills (Undiyaundeye, 2014:15).

Cerruti et al. (2017:374) highlight that communication in the professional, learning, and social environments has been changed by the drastic transformation and revolutionising of the Internet. Social media contains educational apps that can be used to advance learning. These applications provide ample opportunity for different types of learning through engagement with subject specialists on subjects ranging from mathematics to languages (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016:e5). Educators can share homework with their learners by using educational apps and project ideas (Westerman, Daniel & Bowman, 2016:56). Adolescents can thus take learning outside the classroom by completing homework and school projects in collaboration with their classmates (Reid & Weigle, 2014:74). In addition, adolescents with learning disabilities can use social media tools that have been found to have positive effects for them (Uhls, Ellison & Subrahmanyam, 2017:868). Parents can also aid the education of their children by getting involved in their children's learning and encouraging them to engage with educational software that offers extra learning opportunities (Undiyaundeye, 2014:15).

- **Risks to academic performance**

However, Bryant (2018:12-13) notes that social media use can have a negative impact on the cognitive development of adolescents and one of the areas that they may be impeded would be academic performance. Research by Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2019:203) confirms in its reported findings that academic performance was negatively affected by extensive social media use by the high school students who participated in their research, and they recommend decreasing the time spent on social media as a way to increase academic performance. The authors highlight that some researchers proclaimed that time for traditional learning-related activities such as doing homework, reading and studying may be taken away by increased social media use, resulting in decreased academic performance. Another negative side of social media use is that while adolescents are busy using social media for educational purposes, they may be distracted by entertainment features of the sites which cause their attention to stray from their schoolwork (Bryant, 2018:15).

- **Unintended risks**

Although social media can be used to enhance adolescent's cognitive and academic skills, it may put adolescents' safety at risk. The uncontrollable popup banners as advertisements can divert teenagers away from their intended use of social media and lead them to focus on wrongful information that can lead to online child sexual exploitation (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:802). Social media can further be used by criminals to provide information that lure teenagers into making friends with strangers, which may lead to human trafficking (Barth, 2015:204).

2.6.4 Physical effects

As with the effects on mental health and the social and cognitive effects, social media use can have either positive or negative effects on adolescents' physical health. The mass media has been proven to have a huge effect on children's physiological functioning and health, which as a result impacts on their social and psychological well-being (Mazur, Caroli, Radziewicz-Winnicki, Nowicka, Weghuber, Neubauer, Dembiński, Crawley, White, Hadjipanayis, 2017:1).

- **Access to health-related information**

Social media has many advantages such as easy access to information on aspects such as health topics, awareness programmes, and healthcare facilities (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). According to Coochingham and Ryan (2015:4) and Glover and Fitch (2018:175-177) specialised social networking sites can offer great opportunities to provide adolescents with information which may improve their health and well-being and can influence communities relying on conventional health services. Adolescents who are shy to use traditional methods of primary health care can explore health issues by using social media in their own time which can result in joining programmes that facilitate positive health behaviour and change behaviours that are harmful to their health (Ramo, Meacham, Kaur, Corpuz, Prochaska & Satre, 2019:12). Research done by Guilamo-Ramos, Lee, Kantor, Levine, Baun and Johnsen (2014:59) reveal that adolescents were more open to the use of their cell phones and computers to discuss sexual issues without feeling judged.

However, Goodyear et al. (2018:7) warn that how young people engage with social media, apps, and mobile devices may result in negative and harmful effects on health-

related knowledge and behaviours. The authors found that young people are guided by 'likes' and by the followers on social media to decide on the credibility of health information shared on social media (Goodyear et al., 2018:7). Their findings imply that not all health-related information on social media may be based on credible sources.

- **Effects on sleep patterns**

Kelly et al. (2018:59-60) argue that although there are many positive aspects related to the use of social media, it affects the way young people sleep and disturbs their sleeping patterns. As young people are more likely to use their smartphones when going to bed, they may be affected by the radiation emission which are released by the smartphones, and this has a serious impact in their sleep patterns and mental health (Kelly et al., 2018:59-60). A lack of sleep can bring about another challenge, namely insomnia, and related consequences such as overeating and the development of obesity (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:16). Furthermore, poor sleep quality because of social media use can lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and lower life satisfaction (Buda et al., 2021:1041; Woods & Scott, 2016:41-43).

- **Body image and eating disorders**

Research shows that comparison with others online often lead to problems related to adolescents' body image. Acceptance by peers and a sense of belonging is crucial for adolescents and the media sets beauty standards which may have unfavourable effects on adolescents' views on these aspects (Bryant, 2018:10). In a study by Mahon and Hevey (2021:5) adolescents reported the negative influence of social media use on their body image. Especially girls reported dissatisfaction with their physical appearance, self-criticism and pressures related to their body image because of their strong focus on appearance-related content on social media (Mahon & Hevey, 2021:5).

The main cause of body dissatisfaction on social media are adolescents' comparison with peers, social medial influencers, and celebrities (Mahon & Hevey, 2021:5). Teenagers furthermore acquire many false conceptions about aspects such as ideal weight as many advertisements portray slender individuals, and adolescents end up trying to emulate such models and, when not possible, it may lead to eating disorders in efforts to try and achieve the 'ideal' weight (Burnette, Kwitowski & Mazzeo,

2017:114-115). Bryant (2018:8) mentions that body image dissatisfaction in adolescents can result in eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating.

Adolescents sometimes construct images of themselves by trying to attain the bodies of the models on social media, and this can lead to stress and depression when they cannot achieve such bodies (Glover & Fitch, 2018:174). Mahon and Hevey (2021:7) report that most girls who participated in their study reported that their perception of their body was negatively affected by comparisons on social media. Unhealthy comparison can be detrimental as it can lead to neurotic anxiety and poor self-esteem (Glover & Fitch, 2018:174; Kelly et al., 2018:60).

The above situation is a reality of many adolescents because social media is an instrument used by boys and girls to educate themselves about beauty and body standards and ideals (Bryant, 2018:8). Bryant (2018:8) goes on to mention that statistics focuses mainly on adolescent girls regarding body image worries, yet adolescent boys may also develop issues with body image, and this cannot be ignored. A study by Bryant (2018:8-9) showed that 18% of adolescent boys were concerned about their weight and physical appearance and that 29% of them deliberated on their looks more than five times a day. Adolescent boys in a study by Mahon and Hevey (2021:5) mostly perceived themselves as having the ability to withstand the influence of social media by focusing on content that positively influenced their self-image. However, the research findings indicate that both boys and girls experienced self-criticism, dissatisfaction with their body, and self-blame because of comparison to images on social media and their inability to achieve and maintain the wished body standard (Mahon & Hevey, 2021:8). The study by Bryant (2018:9) found that 50% of adolescent boys wanted to gain muscle, 33% aimed for both thinness and muscularity, and only 15% were focused on gaining thinness.

Mahon and Hevey (2021:7) found that adolescents used certain methods to protect themselves from comparisons with images on social media that affected their body image by limiting social media use and avoiding troublesome body-related content. On the other hand, girls seemed to focus more on all body-related content on social media and tended not to purposefully select beneficial content. Girls further communicated difficulties in accepting messages of body acceptance when these

messages are conveyed by people who have the ideal body image according to societal standards (Mahon & Hevey, 2021:5). Facebook appears to be the site with an increased risk of negative body image and eating disorders because of its popularity amongst adolescent girls (Bryant, 2018:10).

- **A lack of physical activity and obesity**

Multiple studies have focused on the relationship between social media use and obesity and studies have confirmed the correlation between screen time and obesity (Mazur et al., 2017:1; Robinson, Banda, Hale, Shirong, Lu, Fleming-Milici, Calvert & Wartella, 2017:97-98). Obesity can be caused by a lack of physical activity because of lengthy periods of time spent on using social media (Barth, 2015:206). When it comes to the causes of obesity in children, long periods of screen media exposure are documented as one of the causes; however, by the same token obesity is documented as the cause of excessive screen media exposure as overweight youth are at risk of experiencing social isolation and marginalisation (Li, Barnett, Goodman Wasserman & Kemper, 2012:261).

The installation of television in children's bedrooms is considered as one of the features of "obesogenic environments" which refer to environments in which children "have reduced opportunities for physical activity as well as inadvertent exposure to advertisement of unhealthy food" (Awofeso, Al Imam & Ahmed, 2018:81). Mazur et al. (2017:6) suggests that parents be advised not to permit mass media devices, especially television, in their children's bedrooms or allow them unlimited Internet access.

Suggestions to prevent or reduce obesity include the use of interactive media to enhance positive eating and physical activity behaviours through online interactions with health care providers and with health-conscious peers (Awofeso et al., 2019:81). The treatment and prevention of obesity have been enhanced by technological advances that provide tools such as interactive intervention methods that contain information on healthy lifestyles, diet and exercise (Li et al., 2012:262). Health authorities in the United Arab Emirates use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to distribute information on childhood obesity and to implement related initiatives nationally (Awofeso et al., 2018:88).

In conclusion, social media use has the potential to cause physical, cognitive, and

social harm to adolescents if used wrongly, possibly leading to the onset of emotional problems such as depression, stress, and anxiety. But social media also have beneficial facets and is gaining favour in society (Bryant, 2018:18-19). It is therefore important for mental health providers to provide education to adolescents and their families on the harmful effects of inappropriate and misuse of social media (Reid & Weigle, 2014:78). Desai and Burton (2021/2022:114) advise that efforts should be made to foster “digital resilience” in children so that they have knowledge of possible risks, how to act and seek help when they are exposed to risks, and how to heal after harmful online experiences.

It is also evident that parents, guardians, and teachers have a particular role to play when it comes to adolescents and social media use (Bryant, 2018:19). Desai and Burton (2021/2022:120) note that the online world reflects the norms, values and attitudes found in the broader community and society. Therefore, parents and caregivers must be supported to model appropriate attitudes and behaviours, including healthy digital habits, to children. Parents, caregivers, and educators also need to receive training, preferably by including obligatory training in relevant policies related to social media use (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:116-117). Schools can play a critical role in providing interventions, for example education on positive and age-appropriate use of technology, in which learners, teachers, parents, and the wider school community can be engaged in (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:116).

This study focused on young adults’ experiences of social media use during adolescence. In the following section, several factors that characterise adolescents’ development, behaviour, and relationships will be discussed.

2.7 ADOLESCENCE

Louw and Louw (2014:303) define adolescence as “the period of transition between childhood and adulthood and the life stage can thus be seen as a developmental bridge between being a child and becoming an adult.” The adolescent life stage spans the ages of 11 to 18 years (Berk, 2013:6).

2.7.1 Adolescent development

Adolescence is characterised by major physical and physiological changes associated with the beginning of puberty, which may influence their psychological functioning

(Louw & Louw, 2014:303-305, 310). Adolescents must adjust to the physical changes related to puberty as well with greater independence from their family (Berk, 2013:205-206; Sigelman & Rider, 2009:486). Although they gain the ability for emotional understanding, self-regulation and empathy and obtain strategies for coping with emotions, puberty and the related changes bring about heightened distress; therefore, adolescence is often described as a period of “storm and stress” (Arnett, 2021:377; Berk, 2013:419).

Adolescence is associated with the formal operational stage in Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, in which adolescents obtain the cognitive capabilities of scientific, hypothetico-deductive reasoning and propositional thought that enable them to think more like adults (Berk, 2013:253; Louw & Louw, 2014:323). However, their thinking is characterised by what is known as adolescent egocentrism, which is thought of as a distorted thinking pattern. Two prominent aspects of adolescent egocentrism, namely the ‘imaginary audience’ and the ‘personal fable’ influence their reasoning and behaviour. The ‘imaginary audience’ refers to adolescents’ beliefs that they are constantly the centre of other people’s attention and result in a higher risk of self-consciousness. The ‘personal fable’ leads to adolescents believing that they are special, unique, and invincible, which can result in sensation-seeking and risk-taking behaviour (Berk, 2013:255-256). Adolescents tend to be idealistic, critical, self-focused and self-conscious (Arnett, 2016:263-264; Berk, 2013:253-254). It can be that the sensitivity to the opinions of others as well as risk-taking behaviours might make adolescents more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use.

A central task of the adolescent life stage is to develop a personal identity, in which adolescents define who they are, what is important to them, and the direction they want to take in life (Branje, Koper & Bornstein, 2018:3; Louw & Louw, 2014:342-343). According to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, the successful completion of this developmental task results in the achievement of a personal identity, whereas unsuccessful resolution leads to identity confusion, with adolescents being unsure of themselves and their roles (Davel, 2017:64; Louw & Louw, 2014:342-343). Forming one’s unique identity involves exploration and experimenting with different roles and questioning of existing values (Louw & Louw, 2014:342; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Identity development can be enhanced by exposure to positive social media (Warburton, 2012:11).

Adolescents' social world widens as they strive for autonomy and a sense of independence (Berk, 2013:577). That being the case, parental control and influence diminishes and relationships with peers become more important (Berk, 2013:579; Crone & Konijn, 2018:1). It is at this point when adolescents tend to spend more time with their peers and value their opinions (Louw & Louw, 2014:367). The peer group, being an important microsystem in the lives of children and adolescents, can have a strong influence on adolescents' development and functioning (Berk, 2013:27; Louw et al., 2014:29).

According to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, adolescents usually conform to the social norms of society (Louw & Louw, 2014:379, 381). Associated with their moral development, adolescents tend to question existing values in their quest to develop a personal value system. Their social environment, such as the home, school, and society, significantly influence adolescents' moral development (Louw & Louw, 2014:370, 385-387).

In the following subsections, prominent aspects of adolescent development found in literature will be discussed.

2.7.2 The development of the self

Associated with identity development, adolescence is a period where a person starts to explore and analyse the psychological features of the self to understand the true self and how they fit into their social environment. Davel (2017:38) views this process as the integration of one's characteristics and experiences into a stable, unique sense of self. It seems that in modern society research on teenage identity formation has centred less on Erikson's theory on identity development and more on the development of self-conceptions (Rapee, Oar, Johnco, Forbes, Fardouly, Magson & Richardson, 2019:9; Vijayakumar et al., 2018:421).

In transitioning from childhood to puberty, children tend to develop more abstract and differentiated self-conceptions, for example being shy among peers, but outgoing at home. In the later adolescent years, these distinctions become less prominent, and adolescents develop a more stable and integrated self-image. Teenagers also evaluate themselves across a number of parameters, amongst others learning, athletics, social experiences, spirituality, and appearance (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:425). During early adolescence, regular fluctuations in self-esteem are reported,

but self-esteem becomes more steady with age (Purewal, Christley, Kordas, Johnson, Meints, Gee & Westgarth, 2017:234; Soenens, Vansteenkiste & Van Petegem, 2017:144). Exposure to social media is therefore likely to have a stronger influence on self-esteem during adolescence.

Adolescents' self-conceptions can vary in different contexts (Prinstein, Nesi & Telzer, 2020:351). They may adopt uncharacteristic self-behaviour such as acting in ways that differ from the true self when they are among peers, depending on the motive behind it. Adolescents may, for example, engage in atypical behaviour because they undervalue their true self or do so to experiment or to please others, which leads to stress and despair (Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017:222). It can be concluded that social media platforms can provide adolescents with numerous opportunities for engaging in false self-behaviour.

Studies further suggest that some adolescents exhibit high levels of resilience in terms of their self-esteem and others not; and that race and gender has an influence on self-esteem. For example, recent meta-analyses have shown that Black adolescents have a higher self-esteem than their white peers and males have a slightly higher self-esteem than females (Morgan et al., 2017:91). The latter might make adolescent girls more susceptible to social media influences, as was discussed earlier in terms of body image. Across all classes, however, high self-esteem is associated with parental acceptance, social reinforcement, positive adjustment, and school success (Keles et al., 2020:81).

2.7.3 Parent-adolescent relationships

No other social setting in which teenagers grow has gained as much attention as the family. Family interaction studies have centred mainly on parent-adolescent relationships, with a more limited focus on adolescents and their siblings (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:430). Furthermore, studies on improvements in family dynamics during puberty tended to focus on parent-adolescent tension, while various studies also focused on aspects of closeness and companionship (Rapee et al., 2019:7). Most studies continue to focus on the transformations in family relationships when adolescents increasingly gain independence within the parent-adolescent relationships (Orben, Tomova & Blakemore, 2020:637; Ozer, 2017:175; Soenens et al., 2017:148).

Many studies in this field in one way or another focus on the effects of parenting on childhood development. It has been found that children whose parents adopt an authoritative, thus a firm but warm parenting style displayed greater psychosocial competence and maturity than those whose parents adopted permissive, oppressive, or indifferent ways of parenting (Soenens et al., 2017:103). On the other hand, an authoritarian parenting style correlates with a wide range of psychological and social problems in adolescence (Soenens et al., 2017:234). Authoritarian parenting is characterised by a punitive, restrictive, and controlling style of parenting (Louw & Louw, 2014:365).

Various scholars have defined and operationalised parental control in a number of forms such as 'effective parenting' or 'positive parenting' and regard the balance between parental responsiveness and control as connected to teenage sensitivity, school success, and psychosocial maturity (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:432). Some authors suggest that the correlation between parental authority and teenage adjustment is based on a genetic transfer of such characteristics from parents to children (Ozer, 2017:174). However, others suggest that the impact of parenting on adolescents' behaviour and growth was negligible, and that peers and the mass media play a much stronger role (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:803; Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017:224). It is fair to conclude that adolescent growth is influenced by the interplay of genetic, family, and non-family factors, and that attempts to separate genetic and environmental components fail to portray the complexity of socialisation processes (Soenens et al., 2017:199). This view correlates with the perspective of the ecological systems theory that relationships in the microsystem are bi-directional (Berk, 2013: 27; Louw, et al., 2014:29), showing the two-way influence between adolescents and their parents.

The relatively stable pattern of parenting and adolescent adjustment outcomes has led many scholars to explore how influences outside the parent-child relationship influence the link between parenting and adolescent adjustment, for example race, interparental coherence, social networks, neighbourhood influences, family arrangements, and peer groups. The outcomes of these aspects were found to vary across samples and circumstances (Prinstein et al., 2020:350; Stergiakouli, Davey Smith, Martin, Skuse, Viechtbauer, Ring, Ronald, Evans, Fischer, Thapar & St Pourcain, 2017:11).

2.7.4 Adolescents and their peers

During the adolescent years, children spend more of their time alone and with friends; and the time spent with their parents drops significantly (Louw & Louw, 2014:367; Ozer, 2017:173). Common perceptions of adolescents have long stressed a peer community with a distinct culture whose beliefs vary from the values of adults (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:431). Adolescents are motivated by peers, and they trust and value their views. They choose friends with common interests, attitudes and characteristics (Louw & Louw, 2014:368; Tilton-Weaver, Kerr, Pakalniskeine, Tokic, Salihovic & Stattin, 2010:333).

The vulnerability to peer pressure among teenagers is not universal. Factors such as their age, appearance, socialisation experiences, and peer opinion play a role and the influence of peers are more prominent during middle adolescence in comparison to early and late adolescence. Furthermore, research shows that peer-to-peer influence only predicts problem behaviours in adolescents who have a history of externalising behaviours (Metzger, Ice & Cottrell, 2012:112; Ying, Zeng, Chi, Tan, Galzote, Cardona, Lax, Gilbert & Quan, 2015:8).

There is evidence that the influence of peer pressure is less in adolescents who are exposed to authoritative parenting (Ying et al., 2015:9). Research also suggests that the influence of the peer group is stronger on adolescents from families with lower levels of cohesiveness, whereas adolescents who do not have close friends are more influenced by their families than by peers (Ying et al., 2015:2). It appears that young people from warm and welcoming communities will have greater social maturity and more positive friendships (Keles et al., 2020:79; McCrae et al., 2017:315).

Louw and Louw (2014:368) explain that adolescent friendships start out in smaller groups or cliques that provide its members with a sense of belonging. Cliques usually begin as 'girl cliques' and 'boy cliques.' Towards middle adolescence, cliques move towards the formation of heterosexual cliques, which leads to a new peer group structure – a crowd – that consists of a constellation of heterosexual cliques. Cliques thus transition from single-sexed to mixed-sexed groups during middle adolescence, and in late adolescence cliques are also turn into groups of dating couples (Flanagan & Stout, 2010:761).

Cliques provide members with a sense of belonging (Louw & Louw, 2014:368). In

general, loyalty is valued, and friendships become more trustful and self-disclosing. Evidence shows that the intimacy of friendship between girls is fostered by conversation, while the intimacy of friendship between boys is fostered by shared activities (Albert, Chein & Steinberg, 2013:119).

Most researchers view the difference between peer cliques and crowds as their size. Coyle, Bramhan, Dundon, Moynihan and Carr (2016:135) however points out that crowds and cliques also differ in form and purpose from each other. Crowds can become large groups of peers that obtain a certain status, for example being nerds, popular, or druggies. They influence the behaviour of peers by setting expectations. Crowds affect adolescents' self-esteem because they are part of a higher-ranking crowd. There has been some indication that crowds can be segregated across ethnic lines, however, amidst crowds of adolescents these cultural distinctions become less important and more permeable (Coyle et al., 2016:137).

Numerous studies explored the ways in which peers influence teenage growth (Flanagan & Stout, 2010:755). These studies firstly show that peer influence can be both positive and negative. For example, peers can support adolescents' pro-social behaviour and their academic success but can also influence adolescents to adopt negative behaviours and habits such as drug and alcohol use and delinquency (Albert et al., 2013:115; Luna et al., 2013:97). Secondly, peers do not control each other by social coercion during adolescence. Individuality is increasingly tolerated between close friends while strict expectations on conformity lessens (Albert et al., 2013:119).

2.7.5 Perspectives on adolescent problem behaviour

Adolescence is often seen as a time of emotional turmoil (Louw & Louw, 2014:354-355). Despite persistent appeals to 'de-dramatize' puberty because of increasing proof that most adolescents go through this life stage without developing major psychological, mental or behavioural problems, literature on adolescent development seems to be dominated by studies focusing on problem behaviour (Vijayakumar et al., 2018:429). Therefore, there seems to be little effort to present a general theory of normative adolescent development (Stergiakouli et al., 2017:8). However, it is recognised that sustained research on adolescent problem behaviour involves a wealth of expert knowledge (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013:2305; Koepke & Denissen, 2012:71).

Purewal et al. (2017:234) mention the need to differentiate between intermittent experimentation and long-lasting trends of risky or problematic behaviour during adolescence. Some studies have found that the rates of sporadic, generally harmless experimentation, for example with alcohol use, significantly outweigh the rates of enduring issues and few adolescents will develop problematic alcohol use. Therefore, more scholars have started to look for means of differentiating between the issues related to adolescence versus those that occur over the lifetime of a person (Rapee et al., 2019:5).

2.7.6 Puberty and its impact

There has been a substantial increase in studies on pubertal maturation during adolescence, with many of the studies focusing on how puberty affects the relationship between adolescents and their parents (Zhu & Chan, 2017:02). With adolescents gaining greater control and power in family decision-making, puberty is a time of more equal interaction between adolescents and their parents. However, emotional closeness and positive affection between parents and adolescents remain.

The effects of the timing of puberty varies between boys and girls. For example, late-maturing boys tend to experience lower self-esteem and a higher sense of inadequacy compared to early-maturing boys who tend to have a positive self-image and are more popular (Louw & Louw, 2014:311; Martin & Steinbeck, 2017:40). However, boys maturing early are at a greater risk of antisocial behaviours and delinquency, including truancy, drug and alcohol use, and early sexual activity; possibly due to them associating with older peers. For girls, the early onset of puberty is associated with a higher risk of emotional problems, poorer self-image, and a greater prevalence of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders compared to their peers (Kelly et al., 2017:59; Louw & Louw, 2014:311). Early-maturing girls are also more likely to get entangled in problem behaviours, for example the abuse of drugs and alcohol, social isolation, problems at school, and early engagement in sexual intercourse (Coyle et al., 2016:134; Louw & Louw, 2014:311). Early-maturing girls may spend more time with older peers, particularly boys, which can make them more vulnerable to psychological difficulties (Louw & Louw, 2014:311; Shi & Moody, 2017:21).

2.7.7 Adolescents and popularity

Teenagers who have close friendships feel welcomed within the peer group and are likely to be polite, humorous and intelligent; on the other hand, those who feel excluded tend to become hostile, irritable, withdrawn, insecure, and socially uncomfortable (Dyches & Mayeux, 2015:255). It is important to differentiate between unpopular adolescents who are aggressive, withdrawn, or both because the reasons and effects of their unpopularity vary between these categories. Aggressive adolescents are often members of antisocial peer networks and those who experience depression and poor self-esteem are usually rejected by the peer group (Dumas, Davis & Ellis, 2019:659). Unpopular adolescents are also more likely to be victimised by their peers; often leading to a poor self-concept and internalising and externalising problems.

Evidence shows that during later adolescence, adolescents become less restrictive in their standards of 'normal' behaviour and more accepting of individual differences. Unpopular adolescents have a greater chance to be accepted within the peer group when they are exposed to interventions that enhance their social skills and social competence (Fujimoto & Valente, 2015:174; Gentina, Tang & Dancoine, 2018:724). The peer group can thus either be a support system, where the relationships and connections lead to a stronger mesosystem (Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:315) or a system that has a negative effect on adolescents' well-being. The techno-subsystem is regarded as one of the sub-systems in the microsystem (Johnson & Pupilampu, 2008:4) and contact with peers on social media may thus also contribute to a positive mesosystem or could have an opposite effect.

It is evident that many of the developmental characteristics of adolescents, such as the effects of puberty, the need to develop a personal identity, and their wish for belonging to and being popular among the peer group can make them more vulnerable to the harmful effects of social media use. These may include, for example, online bullying, rejection, negative comparisons to idealised images, and social isolation. However, care should be taken not to adopt a one-sided view of adolescence as a period of problems and stress while the potential benefits of social media use should also not be overlooked.

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter contained a discussion of social media, its nature, and the popularity of social media use among adolescents. It furthermore focused on the possible effects of social media use on adolescents, which can be both positive and negative. Lastly, the characteristics of adolescence as a developmental stage were discussed. The discussion in this chapter is aimed at providing background information on the topic of social media use as it applies to the adolescent life stage in support of the presentation of the research findings in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has become part of many modern-day adolescents' lifestyle and, although social media use has benefits, many adolescents experience negative effects of social media use (Marino et al., 2020:1; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2019:190). The goal of the study was to explore young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. This chapter contains a discussion of the research methodology that was followed as well as the ethical considerations that were adhered to during the implementation of the study. Furthermore, the empirical findings of the study are presented.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Fouché (2021a:38-39) scientific research is systematic process of investigation that involves a sequence of steps in which researchers wish to increase their understanding of the world, including a description of how the research has been conducted. The steps required for a qualitative study involve the determination of the research approach and paradigm, the research design and method of data collection, the sampling strategy, data collection and analysis, and writing a narrative of the research findings (Fouché, 2021a:46-47). These steps will be discussed as it applied to the study on young adults' reflections on their experience of social media use when they were adolescents.

3.2.1 Research approach

The foundation of the study is formed by the research question, which involves stating the goal of the study into a question for obtaining information to understand a social problem (Fouché, 2021b:57-58; Maree, 2016:27). The research question for this study - *"What are young adult's reflections on their experiences of social media during adolescence?"* – required an interpretivist research paradigm as the aim was to understand the participants' subjective experiences and accept the multiple realities presented by them (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). Interpretivism proposes that people's reality is socially constructed and depends on their subjective interpretation; therefore, it cannot be objectively determined (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). As the researcher was

responsible for a truthful presentation of the research findings, she had to be conscious of her personal experiences and background and the possible influence this might have in her interpretation of the participant's experiences during the study.

To answer the research question and achieve the goal of the study, a qualitative research approach was followed. Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding and describing a phenomenon than with explaining or predicting people's behaviour (Fouché, 2021a:42). Qualitative studies focus on exploring aspects of the participants' social reality as it is described in their own words, and the meaning they attach to their reality (Bless et al., 2013:394; Fouché, 2021a:42). In this study, the qualitative research approach allowed for the exploration and understanding of the participants' experiences of social media use by obtaining in-depth information. The researcher attended to all stages of the research process to ensure that the participants' credible information and true reflections would be presented in the findings of the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:53).

3.2.2 Type of research

The type of research followed in this study was applied research. Applied research is aimed at finding solutions to specific problems faced by specific groups of people (Bless et al., 2013:389; Fouché, 2021b:58; Jansen, 2016:9). The problem that was relevant to the study related to possible problems that are a direct result of adolescents' use of social media. The focus of the study was to collect data that could be used by persons working in government, welfare organisations, and communities that seek solutions to address the challenges resulting directly from adolescents' use of social media, which links with primarily the motivation of applied research (Bless et al., 2013:59).

As a social research study, this study could have more than one purpose (Babbie, 2014:94). Qualitative studies usually have exploratory and descriptive purposes (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:54-55). Exploratory research aims to obtain knowledge of and insight into a situation or phenomenon, whereas descriptive studies aim to present a description or picture of the situation or phenomenon (Fouché, 2021b:65; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:54-55). The goal of the study was to explore and describe young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence, and therefore both an exploratory and descriptive research purpose were applicable. The

exploratory purpose linked with the fact that although social media use is popular amongst adolescents and young adults, their reflections on and experiences of using social media seems to remain under-studied (Hussain & Griffiths, 2018:2). With the exploratory purpose a better understanding of the experiences and reflections of a sample of young adults on social media use during adolescence could be obtained (Fouché, 2021b:65; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:55). The descriptive research purpose was relevant to presenting “a picture of the specific details of the situation” (Fouché, 2021b:65; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:54). By analysing specific details regarding the young adults’ reflections, it was possible for the researcher to provide a description of the phenomenon studied.

3.2.3 Research design

A research design refers to the planning of how the researcher would carry out the study, including the philosophical foundation, sampling method, data gathering method, and analysis of the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:72). The research design is determined by the research question of the study (Bless et al., 2013:130). The case study design is used to obtain detailed information from a small number of units of analysis, which can be individuals, groups, or institutions (Welman et al., 2012:193). The researcher aimed to explore and describe the reflections of a sample of young adults on their experiences of social media use during adolescence (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:75). As with case study designs, the study was implemented within a specific time and environment with participants who could provide information on the research topic, which prevented the scope of the study from becoming too wide (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:81).

The case study design enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ interpretation of their experiences of social media use during adolescence by obtaining rich information on the topic. The instrumental case study was relevant as the focus was not primarily on the young adults participating in the study, but more on their knowledge about and insight into social media use as a social issue in a specific context (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82-83; Schurink et al., 2021a:303). The insight shared by the participants allowed for a better understanding of the effects of social media on adolescents.

3.2.4 Study population and sampling

Research mainly focuses on a specific problem that relates to a specific group of people, known as the population. The population contains all the units of analysis about whom the researcher will make conclusions based on the research findings (Welman et al., 2012:52). The population for this study consisted of young adults who had experience of using social media during their adolescent years in a South African context. As it was not possible to have access to the entire population of young adults in South Africa who had experience in the use of social media during adolescence, the target population for the study were individuals within the geographical area of Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, specifically the southern region of Ekurhuleni. A target population allowed for a narrower demarcation of the population for the study (Bless et al., 2013:164).

A non-probability sampling method was used for the study (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:197). This form of sampling is often used in qualitative studies in which the aim is to develop an understanding of a phenomenon rather than to generalise the research findings (Schurink et al., 2021a:289). The researcher thus chose non-probability sampling as recommended for exploratory research with a specific purpose in mind (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198). Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who met certain inclusion criteria, which would make it possible to obtain information that answer the research question (Strydom, 2021a:382).

The participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- The participants had to be males or females between the ages of 19 and 25 years.
- Participants must 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 social worker.

As the researcher did not have knowledge of the study population in the southern region of Ekurhuleni, she experienced difficulties accessing young adults who complied with the sampling criteria. Snowball sampling was therefore used to gain access to participants for the study. Snowball sampling is suggested for situations where it is difficult to find participants within the study population (Maree &

Pietersen, 2016:198; Strydom, 2021a:383). By means of snowball sampling, the first two participants were identified with the help of a person in the researcher's social circle. These participants complied with the sampling criteria and were contacted by the researcher after expressing their willingness to participate in the study. They were subsequently requested to assist with the identification of other potential participants (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198). The researcher established a trusting relationship with each participant so that they would feel free to contact other potential participants and provide their contact details to the researcher. Snowball sampling thus helped in identifying participants who had the attributes to be able to provide relevant information about the research topic. No participants were from the researcher's personal social contacts or her social work caseload.

The study sample consisted of 11 suitable participants. The sample size was sufficient for attaining data saturation, which was the point when no new information or insights came up during the interviews (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:84).

3.2.5 Data collection

The most common method of data collection when conducting qualitative research is interviewing (Geyer, 2021:355). Interviewing was used as the data collection method for the study. Semi-structured interviews were considered as the most suitable data collection method. These interviews are flexible for researchers to ask clarifying questions and to probe to get more information from the participants (Geyer, 2021:358; Rowley, 2012:262). An interview schedule with open-ended questions (refer Appendix A) directed the interviews. The open-ended questions were prepared beforehand and in line with the goal of the study to ensure that the necessary information to answer the research question could be obtained (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93). However, the researcher was able to keep the interview conversational and adjust the questions, allowing her to probe and explore the information as shared by the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93).

With consideration of the ecological systems theory (Berk, 2013:26; Louw et al., 2014:29), data was obtained on how social media use were experienced in different ecological systems such as the home, school, friends, and family. This allowed the researcher to gather rich data from the participants (Wagner, Kawulich & Garner, 2012:88)

Permission was obtained from the participants to audio record the interviews for accurate data collection, and notes were made where necessary to enable the researcher to probe, explore, seek clarity, and ask follow-up questions as the interview proceeded (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:93-34). The same process was followed in all the interviews. The length of the interviews was based on the time agreed with the participants as well as the extent to which each participant reflected on and shared their experiences of social media use during adolescence.

3.2.6 Pilot study

The pilot study is important to determine the feasibility of elements such as the research population, sampling, data collection method and data analysis (Bless et al., 2013:394; Fouché, 2021a:50-51; Strydom, 2021b:239). The pilot study enabled the researcher to reflect on the interview questions, whether the questions were clear enough for the participants to understand, and the suitability thereof for allowing the participants to provide information that will help the researcher answer the research question. The pilot study could also provide insight into possible psychological harm that participants may experience as a result of participation in the study.

The researcher conducted the pilot study by interviewing one person who met the selection criteria for the study (Strydom, 2021b:237). It was not necessary to make any changes to the interview questions as they proved to be clear and relevant. The researcher transcribed the pilot interview and realised that she needed to be more self-aware during the interviews and ensure that she maintains the focus on the research topic and not veer towards non-related information. Although the participant in the pilot study did not show any signs of distress, the researcher became aware of the possibility that some participants may experience emotional distress as they reflect on their adolescent years. The data collected during the pilot interview was useful and, given the small-scale study, the data from the pilot study was included in the research findings (Strydom, 2021b:236).

3.2.7 Data analysis

Data was analysed by means of thematic analysis, which is a common and widely used approach to analyse data in qualitative studies (Kawulich & Holland, 2012:231). Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to understand the meaning of the

information obtained from the participants through identifying themes in the data (Kawulich & Holland, 2012:231).

In preparation for the analysis of the data, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed into text documents after the completion of each interview, which is seen as the first step in data analysis (Schurink, Shurink & Fouché, 2021b:403). Following the advice of Schurink et al. (2021b:404), the researcher transcribed the interviews herself as the first step in becoming familiar with the data. This process assisted the researcher to determine data saturation, as the point when no new insights, themes and categories identified through the interview process (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:84).

The process of thematic data analysis as described by Clarke et al. (2015:230) was implemented and forms the focus of discussion in the following section. Schurink et al. (2021b:391) explain that qualitative data analysis is an iterative process and does not occur in a linear manner.

3.2.7.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation

The researcher spent time reading the interview transcripts and notes and multiple times to familiarise herself with the data (Clarke et al., 2015:231). Nieuwenhuis (2016c:115) describes this phase as critical for researchers to get to know their data thoroughly. The entire data set was read and reread in a critical manner to consider how the data could relate to answering the research question (Schurink et al., 2021b:404).

3.2.7.2 Phase 2: Coding

In this step, the researcher aimed to identify patterns or interesting sections in the data that could lead to potential themes (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017:6). Information in the data that were of interest were coded by means of short descriptive notes in the margins of the transcripts (Clarke et al., 2015: 234-235). Coding was the first step in identifying information in the data that could possibly be used to answer the research question (Schurink et al., 2021b:407).

3.2.7.3 Phase 3: Identifying themes

In this phase, the codes were reviewed with the aim of identifying potential themes in the data that was already coded. To determine possible themes, the researcher looked for recurrent codes or patterns that could form a coherent section that would say something about and be relevant to the research question (Clarke et al., 2015:236; Nowell et al., 2017:8). Relevant codes were clustered together to form a central concept or theme, each theme was provided with initial theme names, and potential themes and sub-themes were arranged in a thematic map. This process gave an overview of themes, sub-themes and the relationship between them as a tool to help develop individual themes and explore relationships between themes (Clarke et al., 2015:238).

3.2.7.4 Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

This phase involved a critical reflection on the visual thematic map that was constructed in Phase 3. The review made it possible to identify information that could be combined into new sub-themes or shifted from one theme to another (Nowell et al., 2017:9; Schurink et al., 2021b:408). The researcher achieved this by rereading all the coded data in comparison to the themes and sub-themes to reaffirm the relevance of the coded data to the theme (Clarke et al., 2015:238).

3.2.7.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Naming and defining themes is an important step in providing the reader with an idea of what each theme is about (Nowell et al., 2017:10). In this step, each theme was given a short description that described the scope of information presented in the theme. Furthermore, a theme name that indicate the central message or narrative of the theme was provided to each theme and sub-theme (Clarke et al., 2015:240). Phase 5 also involved comparing the research findings with existing knowledge found in literature (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:120). This phase enabled the researcher to get an idea of the flow of information and the overall story that the research findings would present (Clarke et al., 2015:240; Nowell et al., 2017:10).

3.2.7.6 Phase 6: Writing the report

The final step of the process of data analysis consists of the writing of the report to present the research findings in text format (Clarke et al., 2015:241; Schurink et al.,

2021b:412). This step involved providing a narrative of the research findings supported by direct quotes from the data collection interviews and interpretation of the findings in relation to existing literature (Nowell et al., 2017:11). It was important for the researcher to follow the guidelines stated by Schurink et al. (2021b:412) for presenting data in an objective manner and with consideration of aspects such as reflexivity and research ethics to prevent personal bias or assumptions to influence the presentation of the research findings.

3.2.8 Data quality

Data quality or trustworthiness is an important aspect of qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017:11; Schurink et al., 2021b:412). Four criteria are proposed to ensure data quality or trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Kawulich & Holland 2012:243; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123). The researcher considered the criteria to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, as will be discussed below.

Credibility

According to Lietz and Zayas (2010:191) the degree to which the study's findings are a representation of the research participants' perceptions refers to the credibility of a study. During the research process, the researcher intentionally implemented strategies to ensure that the findings of the study are a true reflection of the data collected and are consistent with the reality of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123; Kawulich & Holland, 2012:243).

The following strategies were used to enhance the credibility of the study:

- Peer debriefing: Peer debriefing entails reflective discussions of the research process and findings with peers or experts in the field of research (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:196; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:123; Nowell et al., 2017:3). The researcher contacted the other researchers in the group research project on the topic as well as her research supervisor to reflect on the research process and research findings.
- Reflexivity: Reflexivity refers to researchers being mindful of how their own perspectives can influence the presentation of the research findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192). The researcher was conscious of how her personal views could

influence the research findings by rereading and reflecting on the transcripts of each participant's interview. In the analysis of the data, the processes of coding and identifying and reviewing of themes was found to support reflexivity.

- Thick description: This strategy refers to giving a detailed account of the study topic through conducting multiple interviews and by presenting rich data by means of sufficient quotations and discussion of the research findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:194; Schurink et al., 2021b:395). Interviews were conducted with several participants who gave detailed information on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. The discussion of the research findings was supported by various quotations from the interviews to ensure that rich data were provided on the topic.

Transferability

Transferability involves the possibility of the findings of the research being applied in a different context (Kawulich & Holland, 2012:243). Nieuwenhuis (2016:124) explains that transferability relates to the reader being able to obtain a clear picture of the content of the study to consider its application to his or her own context. The following strategies were used to ensure the transferability of the study:

- Thick description: To enhance transferability, this strategy involved that the researcher provided a comprehensive description of the research process and research findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195, 198; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:124). The descriptions of the study sample, data collection and analysis, and the context of the study, and the use of ample quotations in the discussion of the research findings are given in the research report. In this way, readers can be introduced to the lived experiences of the participants related to the research topic (Schurink et al., 2021b:393-394).

Dependability

Dependability is obtained by providing a clear documentation of the research methodology to contribute to the reliability of the study (Schurink et al., 2021b:394). The researcher applied this aspect throughout the study.

- Detailed description of the research process: To increase the dependability of the study, researchers must provide a clear and detailed description of the research

process and provide details on aspects such as the research design and research methods (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:124). Studies that are clearly documented contain evidence that enhance dependability (Schurink et al., 2021b:394).

- Peer debriefing: Dependability can also be enhanced by means of peer debriefing (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:196). The researcher had reflective discussions with her research supervisor on the implementation of the research methodology, including discussions on research decisions and the procedures followed.

Confirmability

Lietz and Zayas (2010:197) assert that confirmability implies that other researchers will be able to corroborate the study's findings by pointing out the distinct relationship between the data gathered and the research findings. Confirmability is supported by the achievement of credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017:3).

The researcher conducted the study in a professional manner and increased its objectivity by means of *peer debriefing*, *reflexibility* and *thick description* (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:197; Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:125; Schurink et al., 2021b:394). A *thick description* of the research findings is supported by adequate verbatim quotes that represent the voices of the participants (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195). In addition, negative case analysis was considered.

- Negative case analysis involves that researchers look for contrasting data by means of sampling and data analysis (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:197-198). Researchers must therefore also show differences in the participants' comments on the research topic (Nieuwenhuis, 2021b:125). During the study, the researcher was aware of conflicting opinions held by the participants and incorporated comments that did not match the views of others into the research findings.

The study was implemented by following relevant research ethics, as will be discussed in the next section. Ethics are applied continuously through the entire research process and ethical behaviour is an essential aspect of every research study (Welman et al., 2012:181).

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations are intended to guide research practices that will uphold the well-being of the research participants (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:117). Before the study commenced, the researcher applied for ethical approval for the study (Bless et al., 2013:31). The study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria (refer Appendix B). Following, the researcher discusses the ethical guidelines that she considered during the study.

3.3.1 Avoidance of harm

Research participants must be protected from any physical, emotional and psychological harm that may occur as a direct or indirect result of their participation in the study (Bless et al., 2013:28). Avoidance of harm relates to the principle of non-maleficence (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:119). The researcher had the responsibility to ensure that no participant is exposed to harm by virtue of their participation in the study and took the necessary measures to ensure this (Welman et al., 2012:181). Firstly, the possibility of negative experiences that may be linked to the use of social media (Hawk et al., 2019:65), was acknowledged. Participants could be at risk of emotional harm when they share their experiences of social media use during the data collection interviews.

To minimise the risk of emotional harm to the participants, the researcher shared information in the letter of informed consent about the goal of the study, the nature of participation, possible risk, and participants' of right to not agree to participating in the study or withdraw at any given time without any consequences for them. This ensured that participants who were vulnerable were not included in the study (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021b:120). Researchers are responsible for referring participants who experience distress because of participation in the study for counselling (Bless et al., 2013:33). Before the research commenced, arrangements were made with a social worker in private practice to provide counselling free of charge to participants who might experience distress. This information was stated in the letter of informed consent.

One participant experienced emotional distress during the interview. The researcher paused the interview and allowed the participant to recover. When the participant was ready to resume, the researcher ensured that it was indeed the case and at the end

of the interview reminded her of the possibility of referral for counselling. The participant did not follow up on the matter and the researcher respected the participants' decision that she would notify the researcher should she need referral for counselling.

3.3.2 Voluntary participation and informed consent

Ethical research practice requires that participation in a study should be voluntary and unforced (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:121). The participants in the research participated out of their own free will. When recruiting potential participants, they were provided with detailed information on the study and the nature of participation so that they were able to make an informed decision with regards to their participation in the study (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:122). During snowball sampling, the researcher made telephonic contact with potential participants and introduced herself and the study. The researcher confirmed with them that participation in the study was voluntary and that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time they decide to, with no negative consequences for them (Bless et al., 2013:33). All the participants who were contacted gave verbal consent over the phone to participate in the study, after which a copy of the informed consent letter was sent to them via WhatsApp. Once the participant was satisfied, the researcher scheduled an appointment at the earliest convenience of the participant.

To formalise informed consent, the participants were asked to sign the informed consent letter (refer Appendix C). The written consent letter contained information relevant to the study such as the goal of the study, the role of the participants, voluntary participation, freedom to withdraw from the study, the use of information, and the possibility of referral for counselling should a participant experience emotional distress because of participation in the study (Welman et al., 2012:181). The researcher and participants discussed the information in the letter before the start of the interviews to ensure that they fully understood the information and they confirmed their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent letter.

3.3.3 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

The participants had the right to their personal privacy, which meant that the physical setting in which data collection interviews are conducted must be private so that the participants can freely share their views (Strydom & Roestenburg,

2021:124). The interviews with the participants were conducted in private spaces according to the location of each participant. Arrangements were made beforehand that the interviews would not be interrupted and that no one would be able to listen in on the discussions.

Confidentiality means that the participants' details and information is kept confidential (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:124). The researcher ensured that significant precautionary measures were taken to protect the identities of the participants and their personal information. These measures included using numbers to indicate the transcripts of the individual interviews and when using quotes by participants in the research findings, for example 'Participant 1', and securely storing the signed consent forms together with the transcripts of the interviews in a locked drawer in her office. The researcher did not call the participants by their names during the recording of the interviews, therefore even in the recorded audios their names were not recorded. Through these measures, the information obtained during the interviews cannot be linked to a specific participant (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:124).

It was not possible for participants to remain anonymous because the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews. However, the researcher took all the necessary measures to ensure that she remains the only one who knows the identities of the participants and information shared does not directly or indirectly link with their names (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:124).

3.3.4 Deception of participants

No deception of the research participants relates to the research principle of transparency (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:123). The researcher provided the participants with the information about the research study in an honest and truthful manner and did not intentionally withhold any information, keep secrets about the study or provide any untruthful or misleading information. The participants thus received a true presentation of the study and what it was about (Bless et al., 2013:34). Although there were no misunderstandings between the researcher and the participants, the researcher was always ready and willing to address any misunderstandings as soon as it happened (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:123).

3.3.5 Debriefing of participants

Debriefing is an important ethical consideration for ensuring that participants do not have any misconceptions, discomfort or distress based on their participation in the study (Bless et al., 2013:34-35). Therefore, researchers must debrief research participants immediately after their participation (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021:126). The researcher debriefed the participants after every interview by allowing them to share their experiences on their participation, addressed any misconceptions and any possible challenges that could have resulted from their participation in the study. The researcher again confirmed with the participants the possibility of referral for counselling, which would be free of charge, in case they experienced emotional distress because of participating in the interviews. As mentioned earlier, one participant experienced emotional distress during the interview, while none of the other participants experienced any emotional distress. The participant, however, did not make use of the offer to be referred for counselling.

3.3.6 Actions and competence of the researcher

The ethical principles discussed above were observed from the beginning to the end of the research process, as advised by Strydom and Roestenburg (2021:127) and Welman et al. (2012:181). In addition, the researcher is a registered social worker, and her behaviour was in line with the code of ethics outlined by the South African Council of Social Services Professionals. Furthermore, the researcher completed a module on research methodology as part of her master's studies coursework to increase her competency to carry out the research. The researcher also previously completed a Bachelor in Social Work and a Bachelor in Honours Psychology therefore had the skills and competency required to execute the research study.

3.3.7 Publications of findings

It is important that research findings are made available to the reading public. The research findings must be presented accurately and truthfully with recognition of the limitations of the study (Strydom, 2011b:126; Welman et al., 2012:182). The researcher ensured that the research report is presented in an objective and accurate manner, contained no biased findings, the limitations and failures of the study were clearly stated, and the findings were not manipulated. The research report will be available in the library of the University of Pretoria.

3.4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The researcher presents the empirical findings of the study in this section. Firstly, the biographical information of the participants is provided followed by the empirical findings of the study presented according to themes and sub-themes.

3.4.1 Section A: Biographical information of participants

The sample of the study consisted of 11 participants including the participant in the pilot study. The participants' biographical information is presented in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Biographical details of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender
1	20 years	Female
2	23 years	Female
3	23 years	Female
4	23 years	Female
5	21 years	Male
6	19 years	Female
7	22 years	Male
8	19 years	Female
9	21 years	Female
10	23 years	Female
11	22 years	Female

The study sample consisted of 11 participants who complied with the sampling criteria for the study. Nine participants were female and two were male. The participants were between the ages of 19 and 23 years, thus in their young adult years, and had utilised social media during their adolescent years (between the ages 11 and 18 years). The sampling criteria stated that participants should be between the ages of 19 and 24 years. Within these parameters, the above sample show a fairly diverse group in terms of the participants' ages. In addition to their native language, the participants were able to converse in English, as required by the sampling criteria, and the interviews were conducted in English for the purpose of the study. The participants resided in the Ekurhuleni southern region. In addition to purposive sampling, the snowball sampling

was used to gain access to the participants, which means that none of the participants were from the researcher's personal social network or case load as a social worker.

3.4.2 Section B: Qualitative research findings

In this section the findings of the study are presented in themes and sub-themes identified through thematic data analysis (Clarke et al., 2015:230). The themes and sub-themes are summarized in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Themes and sub-themes in the research findings

1. The participants' use of social media	1.1 Age when social media use started 1.2 The purpose of social media use 1.3 Social media platforms used by the participants 1.4 Time spent on social media
2. Negative effects of social media use	2.1 Emotional distress and poor self-esteem 2.2 Exposure to cyberbullying 2.3 Creating a false reality 2.4 Adverse effects on academic performance 2.5 Effects on body image and physical activities 2.6 Effects on interpersonal relationships
3. Positive effects of social media use	3.1 Enhancing mental well-being 3.2 Positive effects on academic performance 3.3 Sharing of information
4. Perceptions on social media safety	4.1 Risks of engaging online with strangers 4.2 Exposure to unfiltered content
5. Suggestions to curb harmful effects of social media use	5.1 The role of parents 5.2 The role of schools and teachers 5.3 The role of social workers 5.4 Responsible social media use 5.5 Knowledge of relevant legislation

The above themes and sub-themes will be discussed next. Direct quotes from the data collection interviews are used to support the discussion of the findings. The discussion of the findings is furthermore supported by integration of literature on the research topic and the theoretical framework of the study.

3.4.2.1 Theme 1: The participants' use of social media

Literature studies highlight the high prevalence of social media use among adolescents, internationally and in South Africa (Beger & Sinha, 2012:3; Boer et al., 2020:1; Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113; Hawk et al., 2019:65; Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:3-4; Raju et al., 2015:80; Salomon & Brown 2018:539). The researcher explored the nature of the participants' social media use during adolescence. Data were collected on the age when the participants started using social media use, their purpose of social media use, their preferred social media platforms, and the time spent on social media during adolescence. These aspects will be discussed in the sub-themes that follow.

Sub-theme: 1.1: Age when social media use started

As stipulated in the sampling criteria for the study, all the participants actively used social media during their adolescent years. The participants started using social media during adolescence, with one participant starting as young as 10 years of age.

"I was about 10 because I think I started using social media when I was in Grade 6." (Participant 2)

"I was 16 years old." (Participant 3)

"I was 12 years old. I started using a phone at the age of 12." (Participant 1)

"Approximately 14." (Participant 7)

"When I started using social media, I think I was in Grade 7 and I think I was 15 years old." (Participant 5)

The research findings show that most of the participants started using social media around the ages of 14 to 16 years; one participant, however, started using social media at the age of 10 years and another at the age of 12 years. These sentiments are echoed by Bryant (2018:4-5) regarding the early exposure of adolescents to social media. Beger and Sinha (2012:3) reported that in South Africa youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years old have access to mobile phones and social network sites. Adolescence and young adulthood are the ages that show the highest use of social media, with the number of adolescent users of social media increasing every year (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:1; Reid & Weigler, 2014:73; Salomon & Brown, 2018:539; Sirola et al., 2021:19). The early exposure of Participant 2 to social media use is consistent with research findings that the use of social media amongst pre-

adolescents is increasing (Bekalu et al., 2019:704; Borgström et al., 2019:129; Davel, 2017:32). It can thus be concluded that social media use can influence the lives of large numbers of adolescents throughout the world.

Sub-theme: 1.2: The purpose of social media use

The participants stated that they used social media to communicate with friends, to socialise, and to keep in touch with family members who did not stay with them. In addition, they used social media for schoolwork.

“I wanted to find a more convenient way to communicate with friends and family especially in terms of those who stay far from me. So, it made it easier for me to get hold of them.” (Participant 3)

“Okay, we used it for school purposes, ... yes with friends, I used to communicate with them using WhatsApp. And family, yes it was cool.” (Participant 8)

“I started using it because at school we had group work. ... I wasn’t a big fan of social media, so I downloaded it for school purposes and to connect with my friends sometimes, but mostly school.” (Participant 9)

“Well, it’s socialising even if we help each other with schoolwork and things. ... You can talk to your siblings that are far away - you know, just to check up on them.” (Participant 10)

The research findings are consistent with other studies that found that social media has become the medium of communication for adolescents and they not only use it to communicate among their peers, they also use it to keep in touch with family who are not staying with them (Andreassen et al., 2017:1; Hawk et al., 2019:65; O’Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011:800). This aspect is one of the advantages of social media, namely that it provides easy access for connecting and interacting with peers and family, and forming new friendships (Brake & Safko, 2009:6; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011:327; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:63; Mesch & Talmund, 2010:46).

As mentioned by Participants 9 and 10, another advantage of social media use is that it provides a platform for sharing information about schoolwork and an opportunity to offer each academic support beyond the classroom to complete projects with their classmates (Akram & Kumar, 2017:74; Hausmann et al., 2017:715; Reid & Weigle, 2014:74). As a means of sharing information and providing each other with support academically, Mazman and Usluel (2011:133) and O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson

(2011:801) share that students use virtual classrooms to work together to do homework and projects.

The use of social media to foster connections and relationships with others shows the potential of social media use for enhancing the mesosystem. Occurrences in one microsystem are likely to affect those in other microsystems (Louw et al., 2014:29). Positive connections between different microsystems can be a valuable support network, which indicates the value of a strong mesosystem in enhancing young people's development and well-being (Berk, 2013:27).

Sub-theme: 1.3: Social media platforms used by the participants

The participants reported using various social media platforms. Previously, due to the easy access to Blackberry phones, they used to use Blackberry messenger (BBM) and Mixit as communication platforms. As they got more exposed to social media and became more familiar with social media use, the participants joined the millions of other users of Facebook.

"It was Mixit, BBM and then it was also WhatsApp. Also, I think I started Facebook in 2015." (Participant 1)

"I think it was Mixit. I had no clue on Facebook because I felt like it was just too complicated. And then BBM came along. Yes, I think it was just Mixit and BBM. And then at a later stage I started using Facebook and Twitter." (Participant 2)

"Okay, it was Mixit and then it was Facebook as well." (Participant 3)

"I had Facebook and there was an app called Mixit and it was popular those days - Mixit and Facebook." (Participant 4)

The participants' responses show that they had different preferences in terms of the social media platforms they used. However, it appears that the Mixit, a platform that was available at the time, and Facebook were popular social media sites for them. The research findings show the popularity of Facebook, which internationally has been found to be the most popular social networking site (Businesstech, 2019:79; Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016:e3; Oberts et al., 2017:52; Roos, 2012:382; Sirola et al., 2021:12). In South Africa, Facebook is also the most popular social media site (Roos, 2012:382).

Facebook allows users to create personal profiles, build social networks, upload posts and photos, and stay connected with family members and friends living far from them (Hall, 2016:166; Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:11; Roos, 2012:385; Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:10). Direct one-to-one communication between users can be done through “Facebook messenger” (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:2). However, the popularity of Facebook is also associated with risks, especially for younger users, and the preoccupation of this platform has led to the term “Facebook addiction” (Rajesh & Rangaiah, 2020:1).

Sub-theme: 1.4: Time spent on social media

The time spent on social media by the participants in their teenage years varied. Most of them reported spending between two to five hours per day on social media, except for Participants 10 and 8 who respectively reported spending more than five and 10 hours per day on social media.

“I think it’s more than four hours because I slept late, number one. I think I slept (went to bed) at 11 o’clock. So, from eight to 11 it could be four hours. I spent a lot of time on social media. A lot.” (Participant 1)

“Approximately two to three hours.” (Participant 3)

“Approximately, I’d say about four hours a day.” (Participant 7)

“I think, let’s see, let’s say five hours up.” (Participant 10)

“Per day I can estimate, coming back from school, I got home around five (pm.). I had to do whatever chores that I had to do. So, I could say from six till eight (pm.)” (Participant 11)

“Most of the time it was more than 10 hours, I was always on WhatsApp.” (Participant 8)

From the above quotes it can be concluded that the participants’ use of social media during adolescence was part of their daily life and they tended to access social media every day, even if it meant going to bed late. The research findings confirm reports that adolescents access social media daily (Coyne et al., 2018:897; Twenge, Martin & Spitzberg, 2018:1). In this regard, the comment by Senekal et al. (2022:1) that much of adolescents’ psychosocial development occurs in the social media, is relevant; showing the substantial impact that social media use can have on adolescents. In this light, the recommendation by Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2019:189) that adolescents limit their social media time to two hours per day appears to be an impossible task for

most adolescents as few seem to be able to do that. The time spent especially by Participants 10 and 8 on social media is in line with multiple reports that adolescents spend large amounts of time on social media (Cerruti et al., 2017:380; Sampasa-Kanyisa et al., 2019:193; Sigmund et al., 2015:11859).

The time spent on social media use as indicated by the participants supports views that the Internet (and social media in the context of this study) has become part of adolescents' immediate living space and, like television, has become part of their home environment (Johnson & Puplampu, 2008:4; Johnson, 2010:178). The microsystem of the home is seen as the child's most immediate living environment that thus has the strongest influence on the developing child (Louw et al., 2014:29). This aspect can explain the substantial effects that social media use can have on young users. Indeed, the participants indicated that social media use had some negative effects on their lives. These effects will be discussed next.

3.3.2 Theme 2: Negative effects of social media use

Research studies suggest that social media use can have adverse effects on adolescents (*cf.* Bolton et al., 2013:253; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Goodyear et al., 2018:7; Hawk et al., 2019:65; Li et al., 2012:264). The participants in the study mentioned some negative effects because of social media use, including effects on their emotional well-being, self-perception, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships.

Sub-theme 2.1: Emotional distress and poor self-esteem

The potential harmful emotional effects of social media use seem to be often underestimated. The opinions gathered from the research participants brought to light the idea that social media use during adolescence can lead to emotional and psychological distress which sometimes can lead to mental illness. Some of the participants explained that they would compare themselves to the information and images of other social media users, which affected their self-esteem and mental health.

"I started having like depression from Grade 8. I remember that specifically. Before that I did not care too much but in Grade 8 and after that it (social media use) did put a lot of pressure (on me). I think it was more emotionally than anything." (Participant 1)

“Sometimes it would lower my self-esteem because everyone was laughing, and you’d think they are laughing at you, you did something. But, oh ‘ja’ (yes) you forgot to open WhatsApp yesterday. This and this and this happened. So, it’s kind of painful.” (Participant 9)

“I would see myself not being good because on Facebook you’d see beautiful people, girls they have money, you know, and you don’t have those things. You have that low self-esteem because you don’t have money, you don’t have Nike and Adidas.” (Participant 4)

“I think, how I viewed myself. Okay for me, I think because of social media that’s when you start having insecurities about yourself because now at times you talk to people that you don’t know and now, they’re seeing your pictures and they’ll be like ‘you’re fat, you’re this, you’re that’. So, before that I never saw myself as, you know, being big. It was never a problem.” (Participant 10)

Participants 8 and 5 highlighted the practice of ‘likes’ on social media and the effects that it had on them.

“Well, I don’t love this thing of liking because now and then even though you post things that didn’t even need (others) to react, people make a joke of that. And some people they end up, like they get destroyed inside because of people’s comments and likes. Yes, they end up doing things like committing suicide.” (Participant 8)

“I can say some use it positively but then some use it negatively because it affects you as a human being and it makes you think you’re better than others. Why? Because you are getting more likes than me. So maybe if there’s someone who’s getting 100 and something like that, and you get about 50, and you feel depressed and you think she’s better than you.” (Participant 5)

From the opinions expressed above, there is no doubt that during their teenage years, social media use often had a negative bearing on the participants. This is evident in the opinions of participants reflecting issues such as low self-esteem and depression. Comparing the self to other social media users, as described by the participants, is a common dynamic found in social media use (Fardouly et al., 2018:1456,1464; Keles et al., 2020:87-89; Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:1-2). Such comparisons, if not positive, can lead to depression and a lower satisfaction with life (Boer et al., 2021:8). In addition, previous research has linked online social comparison with adolescents experiencing the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and the onset of depression and anxiety (Moreno & Uhls, 2019:5).

Another characteristic aspect of social media use, namely the phenomenon of ‘likes’, were alluded to by Participants 5 and 8. Social media users can post ‘likes’ or ‘dislikes’ in response to the information that other users post on their social platforms. The number of ‘likes’ received indicates the popularity of the person and as described by Participant 5, can affect a person’s self-concept either positively or negatively (Goodyear et al., 2018:7).

Another important characteristic of social media is the aspect of emotional contagion, which means that online media use has the tendency to amplify emotions (Barth, 2015:201; Kramer et al., 2014 in Hausman et al., 2017:717). This aspect implies that negative emotional experiences due to social media use might have a much stronger effect on adolescents than negative experiences in person-to-person interactions. The impact of such experiences on social media should thus not be under-estimated.

The phenomenon of adolescent egocentrism includes the aspect of the ‘imaginary audience’ that results in higher levels of self-consciousness as adolescents tend to believe that other people’s attention is always focused on them (Berk, 2013:255). It is thus understandable that feedback on social media, whether positive or negative, may have a substantial influence on adolescents’ self-concept and their emotional well-being.

Sub-theme 2.2: Exposure to cyberbullying

According to most of the participants, bullying in the form of cyberbullying allows the bullies to hide behind social media and bully others. Such behaviour according to the participants are unwelcome as cyberbullying makes the victims feel intense pain that is hard to deal with. Looking at the comments by Participant 2 that she feels insecure after what happened to her friend, one can easily see that cyberbullying is painful even if it did not happen directly to the person.

“People make it look normal to bully people. It looks normal like when someone tags, okay not tags, but shares a person’s picture and comments on how they look and you see people commenting bad things ... it seems normal, you understand? And I think even for the person that the thing is being done to, I don’t think anyone takes it seriously. It seems too normal.”
(Participant 1)

“I had a friend who was bullied (online) so I kind of felt her pain, hence I never posted a picture of myself because I was afraid of what if they do to me what

they are doing to her. So, I was very insecure about that. I didn't want it.”
(Participant 2)

“They do bully people, and it's not nice because sometimes you get bullied by someone you don't even know face-to-face. So, they do bully people. ... Bullying is not okay, is not fine. That's why many kids commit suicide because of bullying. I'd say lets' not bully other kids.” (Participant 4)

“Cyberbullying on social media, it affects teenagers mostly because some of them become depressed, some have a low self-esteem (to the extent) that they become hiding their personalities from the world.” (Participant 6)

“I have been bullied on social media platforms and it can make or break a child. Honestly, it can make or break a child. It can either make you in a way that it teaches you to have tough skin and you are now saying to everybody else in the world 'I don't care what you think, I'm just going to live my life'. Or it can break a child leading a child to depression, to suicide. ... And to them (the bullies) it became a thing of since we cannot approach her face-to-face and tell her whatever that we want to tell her, we are going to start something on social media.” (Participant 11)

While there are several benefits of social media, the quotations above indicate that technology has also led to and aggravated bullying. The findings of the study are consistent with earlier publications that describe the risk of and harmful effects of online bullying (Boer et al., 2021:8; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13). Reyneke and Jacobs (2018:66-67) mention “depression, anxiety, panic attacks, insecurity, lower self-esteem, unassertiveness, poor academic performance, aggression, high truancy rates, school drop-out and in extreme cases antisocial disorders, substance use disorders and suicide” as examples of the extensive consequences of bullying.

This new kind of bullying, known as cyberbullying, is described as behaviour that is intentionally aimed at harming others while hiding behind technology, and may take different forms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010:207). Undiyaundeye (2014:14) mentions communicating false information, embarrassing or hostile information about another person as ways of committing cyberbullying, adding that it is a peer-to-peer risk. Other forms of cyberbullying include spreading rumors or sending hate messages, creating harmful profiles, webpages, or videos, and sending threatening, malicious or hurtful messages (Mason et al., 2017:4; Reid & Weigle, 2014:75). Cyberbullying may be inflicted by people known to the users or by those whom they met online (Mason et

al., 2017:4). A disturbing aspect of cyberbullying is that it is more difficult to control and is widely visible to others (Bryant, 2018:19; Reid & Weigle, 2014:76).

Cyberbullying has created an environment where bullying may occur at any time without the knowledge of parents, guardians, or even school authorities. It is unfortunate that cyberbullying, unlike face-to-face bullying, is hard to be thoroughly controlled or observed by teachers and parents (Reid & Weigle, 2014:76). Research studies indicate that parents and other adults are mostly unaware of their adolescent children's social media use, or do not have access to what is being shared online (Pew Research Study, 2013 in Barth, 2015:204; Davel, 2017:20; Reid & Weigle, 2014:76). It has been suggested that when adolescents begin to utilise the Internet and social media parents and adults should actively participate (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14). Parental monitoring can result in positive benefits for adolescent's online safety (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012:13).

The online contact with peers and others makes social media part of adolescents' microsystem, as explained by Johnson and Puplampu (2008:4). Barth (2015:204), cautions that although support could be offered through social media, it may create an opportunity for further cyberbullying.

Sub-theme 2.3: Creating a false reality

Some participants in the study spoke at length about the 'fake life' on social media, revealing the pressure adolescents may experience on social media to create a reality which does not exist. This effect follows the idea that when people are connected online, they see all the things they wish they have, but do not have in real life. The next best option is to create a new 'online life' in which they dictate their own reality to get the sense that they are 'moving with the times' or obtain the social status they need.

"We have different selves, I believe, and I don't think it's a mask basically. I just think that the person that you want people to see is the one you show them. Because you are different people, if you want to show the fun side, like you only post the times when you are dressed nicely." (Participant 1)

"Facebook, people in social media they don't live their real life. If you can see them in real life, you'd be like 'no this is not that person'. They live a fake life in social media. So, I'd say be yourself even on social media, be yourself." (Participant 4)

“Certain people on social media you’d swear that they live a luxurious life, this and this, but then on a day-to-day basis they’re just like an average person.” (Participant 7)

“Okay, yes people are living a fake life. They are not being themselves. They don’t want to express themselves the way they are. Some of them use social media to take others down, because of we face the same situation, we don’t want to help each other, we don’t want to talk about it; we just want to make a mockery out of it. So, I (adolescents) choose to live a fake life, act like everything is okay while it’s not.” (Participant 8)

“One of the biggest social platforms around right now is Instagram. A person’s Instagram life is never their real life; majority of the time. That’s because the Instagram life is the desire of what I want to be. But now the problem becomes when that person starts resenting the reality and start falling in love with this fantasy that they have.” (Participant 11)

The opinions of the participants not only provide evidence of the new reality that many adolescents create while they are online but the extent to which they are willing to go to fit in and appear as though they are keeping up with current trends. Many adolescents are under pressure to create a fake online lifestyle that is not close to their reality to impress their peers, for example dressing up like celebrities and portraying to be from the middle-class while they are not (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). Some adolescents thus purposefully create an idealised image of the self on social media, which differs from their real-life situation (Glover & Fitch, 2018:174). Of concern, is that when the fake reality that they have created does not yield the expected results they may begin to experience feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). The unrealistic comparisons with others have been found to result in self-consciousness, anxiety, and poor self-esteem (Glover & Fitch, 2018:174; Kelly et al., 2018:60).

It can be argued that the above situation may be linked to adolescents’ need for belonging as well as their task of identity formation. Adolescents have a strong need to conform and fit in so that they are accepted by their peers, while online peer interaction offers them opportunities to explore their developing identity (Louw & Louw, 2014:375-376). It is easy for teenagers to deny their true self in order to please others or purely just to experiment (Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017:222). Hence, adolescents may post false information on social media platforms; meaning that the idealised

images to which users compare themselves are often not true reflections (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8).

Sub-theme 2.4: Adverse effects on academic performance

The results of the study demonstrate that social media use during adolescence had a significant impact on the participants' academic performance during their secondary school years. The participants' experiences show that using social media, particularly during adolescence, creates several risks for learners in school.

“As I said, I wasn't really into my schoolwork from Grade 8 and 9. I'd spend a lot of time on social media.” (Participant 1)

“I lost focus because my focus was forever on my phone talking to friends and family. So that brought in very negative impact. Yes, there was a drop in my performance at school.” (Participant 3)

“Yhoo, I'd stay at home not doing my homework's because I always had my phone. So yes, my schoolwork was affected.” (Participant 4)

“Back then, I'd say it (social media) was a distraction more than it helped me. You'd have to be distracted by it through communicating with your friends, doing this and that instead of studying.” (Participant 7)

“Yhoo, social media; like I never used to do my homework. Let me not say never but at times, you know, I wouldn't do my homework back then.” (Participant 10)

The participants' experiences show a correlation between overuse of social media and poor performance at school. This effect of social media use is confirmed by existing literature on the subject. Even when adolescents use social media for educational purposes, the entertainment features of the sites may draw their attention and distract them from the intended purpose (Bryant, 2018:15). In agreement, Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2019:203) state that research suggests that increased social media use can take away time for doing homework, reading and studying, leading to a drop in academic performance.

Although social media platforms can support adolescents' cognitive and educational development through activities such as sharing information about and collaboration in school-related tasks (Akram & Kumar, 2017:350; Mazman & Usluel, 2011:133; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801), high social media use has extreme negative effects on adolescents' academic performance and cognitive development (Bryant,

2018:12-13; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2019:203). It is also important to note that social media can contain information and content that is misleading (Sirola et al., 2021:2). It can be concluded that, in line with previous research findings, the research findings as reported by the participants in the study indicate that social media use can have negative effects on adolescents' academic performance and cognitive development.

Subtheme 2.5: Effects on body image and physical activities

The opinions gathered from participants are indicative of how social media use during the adolescent years can lead to a change in adolescents' perceptions on how they look. Two participants shared how social media use influenced their body image and the image they wanted other people to assume they have.

"In a way I'd say it did influence how I looked at myself because on social media they portray certain standards that you must keep up with and all that stuff. So, I'd say in a way there's been like some sort of influence upon me that I must maintain a certain standard because everyone else is doing that." (Participant 7)

"Okay, I think likes, likes are pushing us to a point where we end up posting things that we are not supposed to be posting on Facebook. If you are a girl and you post a picture of yourself in a body suite, then most of the time boys will like that picture. You see that boys are liking that picture; it will bring that influence of 'why not, so let me post more pictures because it brings in' ... it makes you more of an influencer; that's what we are calling it nowadays. It makes you more of an influencer meaning people are going to like you more because of the pictures that you post on Facebook." (Participant 3)

Some participants explained that they were no longer participating in sports because of being overly engaged on social media platforms.

"I was no longer involved in netball, athletics." (Participant 1)

"I didn't do sports, but then when I come back from school I did not go to play outside. I'd always have my phone in my room." (Participant 4)

"I was very active, and I used to play sports, back in primary school. And then since I stopped ... me playing sports and things it went down because of social media. But before social media, ... I used to play netball, hockey ... I was very active." (Participant 10)

As evident from the opinions of Participants 3 and 7, social media use during their adolescent years resulted in a negative body image and in posting risky pictures that

would present a positive physical image. This effect was found to be true in existing literature. Fardouly et al. (2015:38), for example, found that as girls are exposed to thin bodies and end up thinking it is the ideal and that failure to maintain such bodies lead to disaster, they may feel worthless and meaningless. The mentioned authors found a relationship between the mood and body image of young women and girls engaging on social media, with negative comparisons resulting in depression and anxiety and some seeing the only way out as to commit suicide. In a study by Mahon and Hevey (2021:7) most girls who participated in the study reported that their body image and perception were negatively affected by social media. Bryant (2018:10) alludes that Facebook is a site with an increased risk of body image and eating pathology because of its popularity amongst adolescent girls.

Ironically, the physical benefits of sports, which could potentially strengthen adolescents' body image, were missed by the participants because of social media use. Barth (2015:206) highlights that the decrease in physical activities and exercise because of long hours of inactivity due to social media use, increases the risk of childhood obesity. The relationship between social media exposure and obesity have been confirmed by several studies (Mazur et al., 2017:1; Robinson et al., 2017:97-98). Li et al. (2012:261) found that obesity could lead to wider psychosocial effects such as marginalisation and social isolation.

The research findings furthermore highlight the missed opportunities by participants to identify the physical benefits of social media as reported by Robin et al. (2017:97, 100). These authors refer to previous research that suggests that interactive media can be used to enhance eating and physical activity behaviours resulting in the prevention or reduction of obesity. The suggestion is reiterated by Awofeso et al. (2018:88) that social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube can be utilised by health authorities to spread information on childhood obesity and implement initiatives to curb the problem. Thus, online platforms can provide specific content dealing with issues of a healthy lifestyle, diet and exercise (Li et al., 2012:262).

Sub-theme 2.6: Effects on interpersonal relationships

Most of the participants described the challenges brought about by their social media use in terms of the relationship with their parents and friends. As teenagers they were always on their cell phones, which affected their interaction with family and friends, as

described in the quotes below. Participant 3, however, mentioned that social media also had some positive effects as it helped her to have contact with family and friends who lived far from her.

“In terms of parents, it had a negative impact because my focus was always on my phone, and I did not get enough time to just sit and talk to them. Because normally families sit together, and they talk. But I didn’t have that time because my focus I was always on my phone ... And then in terms of my friends and family, I could say it brought in a positive impact because as I said they lived far and by using social media it made it simple for me to communicate with them.” (Participant 3)

“Most of the time I had a phone in my hand, I didn’t talk with my parents. I’d go to my room; we never had a conversation most of the time. They’d see me only when we are eating; after that I go to my room. So, it affected my relationship with my mother a lot.” (Participant 4)

“My interaction with people, it also affected that, because before I spoke differently. On social media, I couldn’t hold the conversation, so it affected my friendships as well. Because a person would say something serious, and I can’t have a proper conversation through social media, so it affected that too.” (Participant 9)

As evident from the research findings, the participants experienced changes in their communication patterns as they no longer focused on the conversation at hand because they were constantly on their cell phones. Participant 9 highlighted that, even when communicating online, she could not respond to online messages properly. The participants noted how their constant use of social media has affected their interpersonal relationships.

When reviewing literature on this aspect, the participants’ experiences are confirmed. Because of the inability of adolescents to exercise self-control and shorten their social media use, they expose themselves to be at risk of the onset of internet addiction and related mental health issues (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2021:8). According to Mahamid and Berte (2018:103) addiction can be defined as “craving, diminished recognition of the significance of problem behaviours and interpersonal relationships and deregulated emotional state.” Extensive social media use where adolescents socialise and interact online without limiting social media time may cause them to miss out on chances to interact with friends in real-life situations and form bonds with family and limit their opportunities to develop social skills (Undiyaundeye, 2014:15)

Amidst the potential negative effects of social media use, social media can also have a positive influence on interpersonal relationships, as noted by Participant 3. According to Bryer and Zavattaro (2011:327) individuals who struggle to form face-to-face relationships find it easier to have friends whom they have not met or may never meet in person. This situation contributes to an increase in their interpersonal communication even though individuals do not see each other in person.

The participants also described other positive effects of their social media use during adolescence. These effects will be discussed in the next theme.

3.3.3 Theme 3: Positive effects of social media use

The participants' views of positive effects of social media use can be divided into three aspects: the improvement of their mental health, the advantages for their academic performance, and the positive effect on their ability to access and share information. These aspects are discussed in the sub-themes that follow.

Subtheme 3.1: Enhancing mental well-being

The participants mentioned that there were also positive experiences brought about by their social media use during adolescence. They viewed social media as a tool that helped them to communicate with others, which they found emotionally uplifting. Participants furthermore found comfort from the use of social media when they saw posts of others who experienced similar feelings.

“It brought in a positive influence because it made my life more enjoyable, efficient and much easier.” (Participant 3)

“It had a major impact because as I was like a very antisocial person. It made me understand that shutting yourself out from other people can have an advantage and disadvantage. So, meeting up with people is a very good thing. So, it's not only good for your health, physically but emotionally you get to become this free-spirited person. You get to mingle with people, you get to know people for who they are personally.” (Participant 2)

“As I'm saying, I questioned myself at some point, I questioned who I was, I questioned who I am, I questioned am I really a natural being if this is who the world sees me as. But it also in the long run of me being in social media - I think towards my 17-year-old-which is toward the end of your period - I now started learning that you're actually not alone. There are people who are older than you, who are exactly like you all around the world. It's okay to be

yourself, it's okay to be happy about who you are, and it's okay to not care about what people think.” (Participant 11)

The positive social and emotional effects of social media use, as experienced by the participants, were also found in other studies on the topic. Social media can enhance adolescents' well-being as it enables them to communicate with others in emotionally meaningful ways, share their distress and find support, which may not be possible in face-to-face interactions (Barth, 2015:203-204; Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013:61; Glover & Fitch, 2018:175). This idea is supported by the research of Reid and Weigle (2014:74) that suggests that adolescents can join support groups on social media and connect with others who are suffering from similar issues or medical problems, they can be educated about their illness or situation, and be comforted by others in the support groups. Those who are socially isolated, such as Participant 2, can form social networks that help them to connect with others (Glover & Fitch, 2018:175; Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016:e6).

As mentioned by Participant 11, social media use can support positive identity development of adolescents by means of the opportunities it presents for gaining a sense of belonging to a group with similar interests and for making self-statements that may not be possible in face-to-face settings (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:2; Davis, 2011:637; Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014:4-5). Identity formation during adolescence involves exploring and experimenting with various roles and consideration of existing values (Louw & Louw, 2014:342; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). The Internet as a techno-subsystem forms part of the microsystem (Johnson & Pupilampu, 2008:4), implying that social media use can provide adolescents with direct opportunities for exploring and experimenting that can have a strong influence on identity formation.

Subtheme 3.2: Positive effects on academic performance

In Sub-theme 2.4 it was noted that social media use during adolescence has a negative impact on academic performance. It is worth noting that the opposite is also true, implying that there are positive effects of social media use on adolescents' academic performance. The opinions of the following participants speak to this.

“(There are) advantages. You communicate better with your friends. And then sometimes you help each other about schoolwork.” (Participant 4)

“You can use it maybe to communicate with your friends, asking homework, assignments, searching, talking to people.” (Participant 5)

“Yes, like I said. Me, I do see advantages of social media because number one, you’re able to talk to people who like may be someone who’s at a higher grade than you and they can help you with your homework and things.” (Participant 10)

“It influenced my schoolwork in a positive way because you know you’ve got that certain cousin that you are in the same grade with; so one thing that you don’t understand with a specific subject or syllabus that you guys are busy doing, you could ask him or her ‘do you understand this, help me out’.” (Participant 2)

“We could use social media for our academics, learning from each other and also sharing information which will help one another.” (Participant 8)

The participants revealed that while there were times when social media influenced their academic work negatively, it cannot be refuted that social media positively influences one’s academic performance, which can be confirmed by their experiences during adolescence. This advantage is also confirmed by existing studies. According to Bryant (2018:14) the integration of technology into the education system and daily lives of adolescents has contributed to the increase in the use of social media for educational purposes.

Adolescents use social media to share information and learn from each other about their schoolwork which include information sharing about studies and solving school challenges, for example pertaining to mathematics (Hausmann et al., 2017:715; Mazman & Usluel, 2011:133; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). In addition, social media platforms can be used to access information needed for their studies, including educational apps managed by specialists on school subjects (Akram & Kumar, 2017:250; Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016:e5). In this way, learning can extend to beyond the classroom (Reid & Weigle, 2014:74; Westerman et al., 2016:56). The academic benefits of social media use are further extended to learners with learning disabilities as they can use the available tools on social media to aid their learning (Uhls et al., 2017:868). The educational support through social media can therefore enable learning beyond the home, which can relate to the “richness of the child’s mesosystem” as indicated by Rapholo and Makhubele (2018:315). The positive influence of a strong mesosystem can especially benefit children and adolescents living in lower economic contexts (Berk, 2013:2).

Sub-theme 3.3: Sharing of information

The participants revealed that benefits of their use of social media during adolescence is associated with general information sharing. They spoke of how they were able to use information shared by others to better themselves, for example finding motivation, dealing with problems, or becoming a more religious person. Some participants highlighted how information available on social media could be instrumental in career guidance.

“It built my self-esteem on another level because, like I said earlier on, I am a very anti-social person. So, when I get to read about certain things that I have done research on or something that is sent to me, it would motivate me in a way to want to become a better person in a way.” (Participant 2)

“Teenagers can use social media for career guidance, about their life how they can react in some problems in life.” (Participant 6)

“Connecting with people in a way ... let’s say you have a job, it’s easier to get it out there with social media these days. A job, like let’s say you’re starting a small business, you’re printing things you just post it, you post your work then within two days already 300 people know it.” (Participant 9)

“Education, social growth, mental growth as well. And oddly so, religion because social media was where I met me being a Christian. Without social media I wouldn’t have been Christian because I would have been Christian in a sense that my mom is Christian; I would have gone to church. But it (social media) allowed me to look at that part of myself in other people’s lives who were showing their Christian lives to us on social media.” (Participant 11)

These opinions are confirmed by existing research which argues that, although there are recorded disadvantages on the use of social media amongst adolescents, there are benefits to the use of social media. Adolescents use the internet as a social environment, and they explore issues which are of concern to them (Undiyaundeye 2014:14). In South Africa, information on mental health and mental health services can be accessed on social media, which is especially important where children or adolescents do not feel comfortable to engage in face-to-face consultations, where there are limited mental health services or resources, or where they are part of a marginalised group such as LBBTQ youth (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:114; Glover & Ficht, 2018:176). Online awareness programmes or support groups can provide them with information and support related to illness or problems they experience (Reid

& Weigle, 2014:74). Social media platforms can thus be used to expand adolescents' mesosystem; an aspect that is regarded as a positive supportive factor for young people's development and well-being (Berk, 2013:27).

The participants mentioned some safety concerns related to adolescents' social media use. These aspects will be discussed in Theme 4.

3.4.2.4 Theme 4: Perceptions on social media safety

All the participants agreed that social media is generally not safe for adolescents. Two safety concerns relating to adolescents' social media use were raised by them. They highlighted the risks of engaging online with strangers as well as risks related to exposure to negative content posted on social media platforms. These two aspects are discussed in the following two sub-themes.

Sub-theme 4.1: Risks of engaging online with strangers

The theme of possibly meeting strangers with malicious intentions on social media was a common reason for concern for the participants. They highlighted that not everyone on social media has good intentions and adolescents are at risk of becoming victims of people who use social media to fulfil their malicious purposes.

"Talking to someone you do not know may be very dangerous because you do not know that person and what their intentions are, a trap or anything. Especially in these times I do not think it's a very good idea for us to be talking to people we do not know because girls are easily kidnapped, and so at this stage it is not very useful for you to be talking to someone you do not know." (Participant 3)

"One, that people could be a murderer, a thief, a rapist and all that, you know. So, all of that is wrong. That person can be sent to do something to you. I think talking to someone that you don't know is very risky, yes, because you don't know what's the motive of that person." (Participant 10)

"I'd say don't befriend people you don't know on social media because you never know who you might bump into. There are some dangerous people out there, so I'd avoid, you know, meeting up with a person you met on social media. Number one, we live in South Africa; for women number one, you might be talking to this guy and then you meet him, he's doing something else - he might kidnap you, he might do this, he might, you know." (Participant 7)

As mentioned by the participants, social media use may put adolescents' safety at risk as they may become victims of harmful online intentions by strangers (George & Odgers, 2015:6). The information that is shared by adolescents on social media is not only accessible by people they know as it comes into the become public domain, increasing the risk of third parties with malicious intentions to track the behaviour pattern of the adolescent with the intention to harm him or her (Nyoni & Velempini, 2018:4). This is because there are adults who intentionally use social media to prey on children (Barth, 2015:204; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:333). Roos (2012:401) warns that adolescents may not understand the privacy risks of their online activities while they are probably the most avid social media users. This risk may be especially high in terms of the popular online site Facebook, where users can create profiles containing personal information (Lockhat, 2021:71; Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:8; Roos, 2012:382-383). The reality is that social media provides adolescents an opportunity to not only meet with friends, but they also meet others whom they do not personally know (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:333).

The research findings that social media use is generally unsafe for adolescents might also be linked to developmental characteristics of this life stage. As reported by Mason et al. (2017:2) the characteristics of experimentation, curiosity and impulsiveness increase the risk for adolescents of being both the victims and perpetrators of harmful intentions. Furthermore, adolescents are at a life stage where they are seeking independence from parents and building new relationships (Louw & Louw, 2014:342; Yonker et al., 2015:2). Whereas parental monitoring is a way to protect adolescents against the harmful effects of social media use, adolescents prefer their online discussions to be private and without adult supervision (Barth, 2015:204; Badri et al., 2017:2658; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:4; Hawk et al., 2019:65; Oberst et al., 2017:52).

Sub-theme 4.2: Exposure to unfiltered content

Only one participant, Participant 11, believed that social media exposes adolescents to unfiltered content. Content is one of the four categories of risks or opportunities for social media users (EU Kids Online, 2021 in Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:113). Unfiltered content can result in secondary trauma among adolescents as they view graphic videos and pictures or read horrifying stories posted by other users.

“Disadvantages, I saw more than I wanted to see at a young age. I saw brutality of kids, of adults because social media does not filter anything, a story about rape is a story about rape. Sivela sinjalo (information reported as is) – there is nothing you can do about it, so it created trauma for me. It created fear as well because I was scared now to engage in certain things.”
(Participant 11)

Although only one participant mentioned the risk related to unfiltered content, this aspect is a common risk of social media use. The views of Participant 11 attest to statements by Popovac and Leoschut (2012:1) that the unmonitored use of cyber space can expose adolescents to pornography, violence, harmful information, sexual images and more. The exposure of adolescents to harmful online content has been reported to result in mental health issues (Fardouly et al., 2018:1457). In addition, adolescents may be exposed to sexual grooming; a practice that starts out as a positive friendship in which the adolescent is complemented and flattered, which increases their risk of online sexual grooming (Wurtele & Kenny, 2016:336).

Given the risks and harmful effects of social media use, measures need to be implemented to prevent the potential harm caused by social media use during adolescence. The participants’ suggestions for limiting harm will be presented in Theme 5.

3.4.2.5 Theme 5: Suggestions to curb harmful effects of social media use

The participants suggested that parents, schools and teachers, social workers and adolescent social media users should all be involved in preventing the potential harmful effects of social media use. They furthermore suggested that people should gain knowledge about legislation relevant to social media use. These aspects will be discussed in the sub-themes to Theme 5.

Sub-theme 5.1: The role of parents

The participants agreed on the value of parents being involved in efforts to prevent the harmful use of social media by their adolescent children. Most participants suggested that parents should monitor and supervise adolescents while others suggested that they need to educate and talk to their children about the advantages and disadvantages of social media use.

“Educating their children in terms of the use of social media, I think in that way they (adolescents) can learn more and know that this is why we are using social media, and these are the reasons we are using it for. In that way they can be able to learn and gain more knowledge.” (Participant 3)

“I take the side of parents, I think parents should monitor their children’s phone, not every day ... maybe once or twice a week.” (Participant 5)

“I think parents can guide them (adolescent children) on how to use it and tell them that they must not talk to strangers, that they must not expose their real personalities because some include their real names and real identity numbers and that is not safe because some people can take these for their personal use.” (Participant 6)

“They should supervise them because you can’t just say they should stop buying them phones because parents use phones to get hold of us (children), just to check on where we are, our safety and so on.” (Participant 8)

“Monitor the children because so many children start using social media these days at (the ages of) eight, nine, 10 and their parents don’t monitor them, and they don’t know that the Internet is a scary place especially for kids. They need to be monitored all the time.” (Participant 9)

The findings of the study are consistent with the recommendations made by Undiyaundeye (2014:14) that parents need to assume an active role when adolescents begin to use social media. The author states that it is necessary for parents to be aware of the advertisements on social media sites used by their adolescent children as this is how information about the user is collected. Parents must monitor their children’s social media use as this activity has become popular amongst adolescents (Badri et al., 2017:2658; Cookingham & Ryan, 2015:4). Parental supervision is achievable for parents who use technology and are familiar with the online applications used by their children (Undiyaundeye, 2014:14-15). However, many parents have limited knowledge about technology, the Internet and the inherent dangers of social media use while their adolescent children have more advanced knowledge; a situation that makes it difficult to monitor their children’s internet use (Glover & Fitch, 2018:176; Louw & Louw, 2014:375; O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011:801). Popovac and Leoschut (2012:8) recommend the implementation of awareness campaigns and safety programmes for both adults and children.

Participants 4 and 7 held a different perspective and expressed that adolescents should not be allowed to have access to mobile phones and social media until they are 18 years old.

“I took so many risks, even my schoolwork, my relationship with my parents, it just went down. So, it’s not okay. ... when you are 18, you can start having social media.” (Participant 4)

“They must not give their children phones up until they are at least 17 or 18.” (Participant 7)

Based on the fact that adolescents themselves regard social media as an important part of their life to form friendships, maintain these friendships, and get to know more about the world, Sirola et al. (2021:25) question whether keeping them away from social media can be a remedy that will be beneficial to the parent-child relationship. Adolescents are reported to be the most active users of online social networks, and each year social media use among adolescents continues to increase (Reid & Weigle, 2014:73; Raju et al., 2015:80; Salomon & Brown, 2018:539). Therefore, the likelihood of keeping adolescents away from social media is questionable without straining the parent-child relationship.

In the lives of adolescents, parents and caregivers become less influential and their peers become more important (Berk, 2013:579; Crone & Konijn, 2018:1). This is also a phase where adolescents develop a sense of autonomy and seek to gain independence (Berk, 2013:577). As a result, they develop independent relationships and seek less parental control over their lives while they spend more time with and value their peers’ opinions more (Louw & Louw, 2014:342) This means that social media use is a popular activity among adolescents (Anderson & Jiang, 2018:9). Those who do not have access to social media may feel excluded, and adolescents who feel excluded or unpopular among their peers tend to be socially uncomfortable, hostile, irritable, withdrawn and insecure (Dyches & Mayeux, 2015:255). Denying adolescents access to social media can potentially be harmful to them and have a negative influence on their relationships with their parents. It is then concluded that denying adolescents access to social media by parents is more likely to have negative unintended outcomes on both the adolescent and the parent.

The findings of the study are consistent with the perspective of the ecological systems theory that people in the environment help children construct their experiences while children are not passive but active role players in their environment (Christensen, 2016:23). Relationships in the microsystem are bi-directional in nature (Berk, 2013: 27; Louw et al., 2014:29). This implies that parents and adolescents mutually influence

each other's behaviour and that the relationship adolescents have with their parents may influence how they use and experience social media. Parents must therefore be educated on teaching and modelling positive online behaviours and healthy online habits to their children (Desai & Burton, 2021/2022:116-117).

Sub-theme 5.2: The role of schools and teachers

All the participants agreed that social media formed part of their daily life and have been incorporated into their education system when they were adolescents. They agreed that adolescents could benefit from the use social media as it took learning beyond the classroom. Hence, they all recommended that teachers and schools play a role in educating adolescents about the safe use of social media to curb the potentially harmful effects that comes with social media use. Participant 3 further suggested collaborative work between schools and professionals to contribute to safe social media use.

“Okay, I think at schools; schools can call upon experts that have more knowledge about the benefits of the use of social media. In that way they can create awareness to teenagers and help them gain more knowledge as to why are we using social media and why are we not supposed to be using it and what things are we supposed to be using it for and what things are we not supposed to be using it for. And then I can suggest that they make them aware of the harmful use of social media by making them aware of the negative and the positive influence of social media amongst young people.”
(Participant 3)

“There are those social media platforms that are safe, maybe WhatsApp. Even teenagers these days have WhatsApp. So, I'd say teachers should teach more at school about social media and the safe side and the unsafe side.” (Participant 4)

“Teachers need to teach the kids (about social media use). They need to tell them from a very young age, and they should be honest that these are the advantages, and these are the disadvantages.” (Participant 10)

In agreement with the recommendations of the participants, Desai and Burton (2021/2022:116) suggest that schools form an ideal context for implementing interventions for safe social media use. According to Bryant (2018:19) the collaboration of parents, guardians, and teachers have a specific role to play in terms of adolescents' social media use; this view is affirmed by the findings the study.

Partnerships between parents and schools can have a positive effect on adolescents' social media use and increase online safety (Popovac & Leoshut, 2012:13).

The above findings emphasise the importance of collaboration between the different microsystems in the life of the child because of the influence of the relationship between these systems on each other and ultimately on the child (Berk, 2013:27; Christensen, 2016:23; Kamenopoulou, 2016:516; Louw et al., 2014:29). From an ecological perspective, such collaboration will support a strong mesosystem which will result in a positive and supportive environment for the development of children and adolescents (Berk, 2013:27; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2018:315).

Sub-theme 5.3: The role of social workers

The participants viewed the role played by social workers as important to provide guidance on the pros and cons of using social media. They indicated that such a role by professionals could make children and adolescents aware of the boundaries necessary for responsible use of social media. Some participants believed that adolescents might listen more to psycho-social teachings regarding social media use when it is presented by social workers as mental health professionals.

“Even social workers must talk psychologically, you know, talk to teenagers that social media is fine there and there but then on the other side it’s not safe.” (Participant 4)

“Social workers should give guidance to teenagers on the challenges of social media.” (Participant 6)

“Okay, so the same thing with the teachers and that group I was talking about, social workers should do the same. There should be an organisation, maybe in that organisation there’s going to be a teacher, maybe a social worker, you know. They should tell the young people, you know, the advantages and disadvantages (of social media use).” (Participant 10)

Participant 9 further shared that social workers' role may include counselling to adolescents who have been victims of cyberbullying.

“Oh, I think they should deal with cyberbullying especially. When the child is being cyberbullied, most of the time it’s not taken seriously. Because as a child you’d be like ‘okay I’m being cyberbullied by who’, you don’t know who that person is. Then their mental health goes down and it’s not taken seriously until the child is suicidal or depressed. Then the social workers see

oh this was actually serious. They should take cyberbullying as serious as they do regular bullying.” (Participant 9)

The research findings reiterate the important role that can be played by mental health service providers in providing education to adolescents regarding the harmful effects of inappropriate social media use (Reid & Weigle, 2014:78). According to the Framework for Social Welfare Services (Department of Social Development, 2013:31), social workers can, amongst others, provide prevention and promotion services “aimed at enhancing people’s capacity to take control of factors that impact on their well-being.” The services on prevention and promotion level fit with the suggestions by the participants as they aim to lower people’s vulnerability by reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors to enhance people’s well-being.

Subtheme 5.4: Responsible social media use

The participants shared that responsible social media use by adolescents can help to curb the potential harmful effects of social media use on them. They suggested that adolescents should take responsibility for limiting the time they spend on social media and using social media under the supervision of their parents to bring about the desired positive changes. Furthermore, the participants suggested that adolescents should make their parents aware of the content they are exposed to on social media.

“I think it is to limit the amount of time you (adolescent) spend on social media and actually get to live your life outside of social media.” (Participant 1)

“I’d say they must inform their parents when they (access) social media platforms because it’s safer, because you’d tell your mother ‘Someone wants to meet me’ and then your mother would be like ‘no it’s not safe’. Because if you hide that you have social media, you’ll go meet that person and you lie at home.” (Participant 4)

“I think they should be careful, like they should be careful what they post and what they say, and I feel like especially teenagers, they should be monitored by their parents even though it’s not regularly they should be monitored. They should know who they’re talking to, they should know what they’re posting and how it will affect another person.” (Participant 9)

Participant 7 mentioned that adolescents must also be emotionally prepared to deal with hurtful messages on social media.

“I’d say that people must not take everything that they read so personally on social media because a lot of people who write these things wouldn’t say

those things to your face. So, what's the use of taking it to heart when that person wouldn't even say it to your face?" (Participant 7)

The research findings are consistent with reports by Hendricks and Kanjiri (2021:8) that the inability of adolescents to exercise self-control and limit their use of social media increase their risk for the development of mental health issues. Cyberbullying, online harassment, and sexting have been reported in previous studies as the outcome of spending too much time on social media (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011 in Coyne et al., 2018:897). According to Bryant (2018:18), the irresponsible use of social media has the prospective of causing mental health issues, with severe outcomes. The involvement of parents in monitoring the time adolescents spend on social media curbs the harmful effects of social media use on adolescents (Fardouly et al., 2018:1465). It is therefore noted that in addition to adolescents exercising self-control, limiting the time spent on social media, the role of parents is equally important to ensure that the harmful effects of social media on adolescents are curbed.

Sub-theme 5.5: Knowledge of relevant legislation

Only three of the 11 participants reported knowing about legislation guiding social media use when they were adolescents. The rest of the participants had no knowledge of any legislation guiding people's conduct on social media during their adolescence years, as in the examples below.

"Never, not while I was still in my teenage years. No, I was never aware of that, I became aware of that recently that there's like some privacy laws and all of that stuff." (Participant 7)

"No, I didn't even know. I know maybe when you're trying to do something, maybe there are certain websites they'll be like 'Are you 18, yes or no'. That's what I knew." (Participant 10)

"No, I was not aware. I only started learning legislation and laws on social media when I started working with social media, which is currently, because I had to now understand the perspective behind it. But as a teen I did not know it." (Participant 11)

During adolescence, Participants 6, 8 and 9 were aware of the legislation against cyberbullying.

"I only knew about cyberbullying, like if one learner gets involved in cyberbullying there would be penalties for that." (Participant 6)

“I can’t say the specific Act, but I knew that sharing wrong things, one can be jailed for that especially those who share people’s nudes, one can be jailed for that. Cyberbullying you can also be jailed for that.” (Participant 8)

“Cyberbullying, that’s one of the reasons why I did not like social media because of the bullying there. And I knew there was a law but the law is not actually in affect, you can’t take a person to court especially if you don’t know them. So that’s why I was not a huge fan of social media.” (Participant 9)

The research findings confirm the statement by Roos (2012:401) that although teenagers are the most committed users of social network sites, they have little knowledge and understanding of the inherent privacy risks involved in the usage of the social networking sites. Hence some authors recommend that Facebook needs to prioritise educating teenagers about the risks involved in social media use (Nyoni & Velempini, 2015:9; Roos, 2012:401). Although the POPI Act was signed into law in 2013 in South Africa to defend the rights and privacy of users, none of the participants in the study by Nyoni and Velempini (2015:8) was aware of the Act. It is thus concluded that adolescents appear to have little knowledge about the legislation that guides the use of social media. Desai and Burton (2021/2022:116-117) recommend that training of parents, caregivers and teachers on online safety should preferably include information on policies relevant to social media use. The authors further suggest that the guidelines for E-safety in schools of the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should be revised to include more information about the potential risks of social media use and best practices to address these risks.

3.5 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the research methodology for the study and empirical findings relevant to the young adults’ reflections of social media use during adolescence were presented. The ethical considerations that guided the research study were also discussed. The next chapter will focus on the presentation on the key findings of the study, conclusions based on these findings and recommendations for practice and further research. The chapter will also contain a discussion on the achievement of the goal and objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 4

KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, social media use has become popular particularly among the younger generation (Goodyear et al., 2019:23). Social media use has provided adolescents with new advantages but also presents risks to the young generation, more so than experienced in the past (Bryant, 2018:2). This study was intended to explore young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence. The key findings of the research are summarised in this chapter, followed by conclusions and recommendations based on the findings. The chapter will be concluded with an indication of how the goal and objectives of the study have been achieved.

4.2 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study was to explore and describe the young adults' reflections on their experiences of the use of social media during adolescence.

In order to achieve the research goal, the following objectives were formulated:

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

In line with the goal of the study, the following research question was stated for the study: *What are young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media during adolescence?*

The research findings of the study were obtained by analysing the data collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 11 participants in young adulthood who used social media during their adolescent years.

4.3 KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The key findings of the study will be discussed focusing on the nature of the participants' social media use during adolescence, the negative and positive effects of social media use, and the participant's perceptions on safety aspects of social media use. Furthermore, the findings related to the participants' suggestions on how to curb the harmful effects of social media on adolescents will be presented.

4.3.1 Social media use during adolescence

The participants described they were active users of social media during their adolescent years. This finding is supported in literature on adolescent social media use.

- The participants started using social media mostly between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Two participants started using social media at the ages of 10 and 12 years, respectively, which supports literature that children start using social media at an increasingly younger age.
- The participants used social media mainly to make contact and communicate with friends and family, while they also used it to share information about their schoolwork. These purposes of social media use are described as common goals of social media use among adolescents.
- Although the participants used various online platforms, it appears that Facebook was the most popular social media platform used by them. Facebook allows users to create personal profiles and upload photos and information/posts and is said to be the most popular social networking site in South Africa.
- Most of the participants accessed social media daily and it has become an integral part of their daily lives. The number of hours that the participants spent on social media was between two to five hours per day, with two participants who respectively reported spending about seven and 10 hours per day on social media.

4.3.2 Negative effects of social media use

Social media use during adolescence had negative effects on the participants. The risks or potential negative effects of social media use is a strong theme in the literature on adolescent social media use.

- The participants reported that social media use resulted in emotional distress, especially depression, and a poor self-esteem during their adolescent years. These effects were mostly caused by comparing themselves to the information and images posted online by other social media users. Furthermore, the number of 'likes' received on social media had an influence on their well-being, with more 'likes' leading to positive emotions, vice versa.
- Cyberbullying was a prominent aspect in the research findings. Online bullying, whether by persons known or unknown to the victim, was said to have extremely harmful effects on adolescents, whether they were a victim or observer of the bullying. The socio-emotional effects included depression and poor self-esteem, and cyberbullying is seen as a risk factor for adolescent suicide.
- To fit in with the online community, many adolescents are under pressure to create a false reality or 'fake life' on social media. Their online life presents an idealised image of the self, which in the end can lead to conflicting feelings about the self and result in anxiety, self-consciousness, poor self-esteem, and unworthiness. Ironically, the images they compare themselves to are probably also false.
- Social media use had a negative effect on the participants' academic performance during their secondary school years. A drop in their school performance was caused by long hours spent on social media and by social media use distracting them from doing homework. The literature confirms that spending excessive time on the social and recreational aspects of social media could have a negative effect on adolescents' cognitive and academic development.
- Social media use influenced the participant's physical well-being; firstly, in developing a negative body image due to comparing themselves to the 'ideal' body images online and, secondly, by following a more sedentary lifestyle. Developing a negative body image could lead to emotional problems such as depression. Furthermore, some may post revealing photos on social media to get more 'likes' from others. The participants also explained that they spent less time on physical activities and sport because of the time spent on social media.
- The participants' interpersonal relationships, especially relationships with their parents, were negatively affected as they spent more time on social media than

with family members in the home. Social media use was also found to negatively affect their ability to confidently communicate in face-to-face interactions.

4.3.3 Positive effects of social media use

Social media use also had positive effects on the participants, for example on their mental well-being and academic performance, and provided easier access to information.

- Some participants found that their engagement on social media helped them to build interpersonal relationships, which was found to be easier than forming relationships in face-to-face situations. They also became aware that other people have similar experiences to theirs, which lowered feelings of self-doubt. Information in the literature supports the idea that social media can help people to find support and help those who are socially isolated to connect with others.
- Whereas social media were found by some to negatively affect their academic performance, some participants found that social media use enabled them to share school-related information with their peers, obtain support, and access online information for assignments. These were beneficial to their schoolwork.
- The participants also gained information that supported their personal growth, for example information that would encourage motivation, provide career guidance, and provide support through religion. Studies confirm that social media allow adolescents to explore information about issues that are important to them.

4.3.4 Perceptions on safety of social media use

Social media can be an unsafe space for adolescents because of the inherent risks that comes with exposure to social media content and interactions/conduct.

- The participants warned that adolescents could be exposed online to strangers who may not have good intentions, which could put their personal safety at risk. As these strangers could invite adolescents to meet in person, online interactions with such individuals could lead to dangers such as kidnapping, rape, human trafficking, and murder. The literature indicates that these risks are increased when adolescents do not understand privacy settings on social media and when parents are not aware of their children's social media use.

- Only one participant spoke about the danger of exposure to unfiltered content on social media. In the literature, the danger of harmful content is a prominent theme and includes aspects such as pornography, violence, sexual images and sexual grooming.

4.3.5 Suggestions to curb harmful effects of social media use

The participants suggested how teachers, parents, social workers, and adolescents can play a part to curb the harmful effects of social media use.

- The participants suggested that parents can curb the harmful effects of social media use by monitoring the time adolescents spend on social media as well as the content that they are exposed to. Parents can also model healthy patterns of social media use.
- Some participants shared that parents should not allow children to have cell phones before the age of 18. However, in the literature this option is described as unrealistic and harmful to the parent-child relationship.
- It was suggested that schools and teachers play a role in teaching adolescents about responsible social media use and the inherent risks involved in engagement on social media.
- The participants suggested that social workers can play a role in educating adolescents about the advantages and disadvantages of social media use. Social workers could also provide counselling to adolescents who experience harmful effects of social media, for example adolescents exposed to cyberbullying.
- Adolescents themselves must take responsibility for their social media use so that they can enjoy the benefits of social media use and avoid the risks thereof. Adolescents must, for example, monitor the time they spend on social media, inform their parents when they become aware of harmful content, and carefully consider the content that they post on social media.
- Adolescents, parents and teachers must also obtain knowledge of legislation and policies relevant to social media use. This aspect is important as most of the participants did not have knowledge of legislative frameworks that are relevant for guiding social media use when they were teenagers. This knowledge can promote

safe social media use, for example in terms of privacy, and prevent them from the risk of breaking the law.

4.4 CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are based on the findings of the study:

- The research findings support literature that describes social media use as a popular activity among adolescents. Adolescents often start using social media during early adolescence and spend long hours engaged in online activities.
- Social media use can have both benefits and risks for adolescent users. Benefits and risks could be found in terms of the elements of content, contact (their active participation) as well as conduct (their online interactions). The phenomenon of emotional contagion through social media shows the strong influence of social media on adolescents' emotional well-being, which can be either positive or negative.
- Social media use can have several advantages for adolescents, including keeping in touch with friends and family, sharing information on schoolwork, access to health-related information, and interactions that help them with identity formation. However, these advantages can only be experienced fully if adolescents are protected against the risks and dangers of social media use.
- There are several risks of social media use that could be harmful to adolescents' physical, emotional, social, and cognitive functioning and on their personal safety. Due to their developmental characteristics, adolescents are regarded as more vulnerable to the risks of social media use. Comparison to others on social media present a risk for adolescents' mental health and self-esteem at a stage when they are forming their identity and self-concept and have a strong need for acceptance and belonging to the peer group. Ironically, they often compare themselves to false and unrealistic content on social media.
- Although some participants might have been able to limit the time they spent on social media, others spent excessive time on social media, sometimes taking up the time of what can be regarded as a 'full workday'. This aspect relates to the risk of online addiction, which can have a detrimental influence on adolescents' functioning.

- Extreme risks involve cyberbullying, which may lead to suicide, as well as sexual grooming and exposure to pornography. Online bullying seems to have become a 'normalised' activity on social media and can have detrimental effects on adolescents; leading to depression, low self-esteem, and even to suicide. Adolescents who are not aware of such risks may unintentionally become victims thereof.
- From the research findings and from literature consulted, it can be concluded that risks related to social media use are more prevalent than the advantages thereof. As social media use has become part of adolescents' lifestyle, it is important to provide them with strategies for responsible social media use and strategies for preventing exposure to the harmful effects thereof.
- The research findings show the strong influence of social media use on the adolescent in the settings of the home, school, and peer group. Daily interactions and easy access at any place, even in bedrooms, support the idea of social media as the techno-subsystem that forms part of the microsystem. Therefore, social media is likely to have a significant influence on adolescents' lives.
- Adolescents, parents, teachers, schools and professionals should all take responsibility and collaborate to promote responsible social media use by adolescents.
- Social media use can provide opportunities for supportive interactions between adolescents, peers and teachers or schools and can strengthen adolescents' mesosystem. A strong mesosystem is associated with benefits to the person's overall development and functioning.

4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher presents recommendations for social workers who provide services to adolescents and their families. The recommendations can also be considered by other professionals in the social services professions. Furthermore, recommendations for future research will be presented.

4.5.1 Recommendations for practice

- Social media has become part of the modern lifestyle. Therefore, education for

adolescents on safety and risks or social media use is an important preventive intervention to support responsible social media use and prevent the harmful effects thereof. Education on social media use must include aspects such as the advantages and risks of social media use, responsible interactions and content, privacy settings, time management, relevant legislation, the importance of parental monitoring, and when to seek help. Social workers can develop awareness and education programmes that can be presented at setting such as schools, youth organisations, churches, and non-government organisations.

- For this purpose, social workers themselves must gain adequate knowledge of the above aspects. Social workers can take initiative to develop awareness programmes on responsible Internet and social media use, and on interventions to support adolescents and families who experience problems because of social media use. Social workers must recognise that some adolescents may find online counselling more comfortable than face-to-face sessions and explore the practical possibility of online counselling. Social workers from government, non-government organisations and private practice can collaborate to develop such programmes.
- As many parents may not have sufficient knowledge to monitor their children's social media use and support responsible social media use, it is important to educate parents on social media use. Education of parents is important so that they have knowledge of what adolescents may be exposed to on social media. Programmes can be presented at settings such as community centres, schools, and churches.
- Schools provide a valuable setting for educating children and parents about the Internet and social media use. Social workers, teachers and schools can collaborate in interventions to support responsible social media use by children and adolescents. In impoverished communities, schools can have facilities like afterschool Internet centres for children to access information of academic work and health issues.

4.5.2 Recommendations for future research

The researcher makes the following suggestion for future research:

- Research studies can be conducted on legislation relevant to social media use and

adolescents' knowledge of legislative frameworks in terms of aspects such as cyberbullying and online grooming and harassment. This information can lead to the development of educational programmes for responsible social media use by children and adolescents.

- Future research can explore parents' knowledge of social media use and their ability to monitor their children's social media use. This information can be used to develop educational programmes for parents on monitoring children's social media use. Further studies can evaluate the effectiveness of educational programmes presented to parents.
- Research can be conducted on the role of schools and teachers in curbing harmful effects of social media use on children and adolescents. Such research may be beneficial to the collaboration between social workers and schools/teachers to promote positive social media use.

In the next section, the researcher will indicate how the goal and objectives of the study were achieved.

4.6 ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE GOAL OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study was to explore and describe the young adults' reflections on their experiences of the use of social media during adolescence. Following, the researcher provides information on how the objectives of the study was accomplished to achieve the goal of the study.

- **To theoretically conceptualise social media and contextualise it within the South African context**

The researcher achieved this objective by conducting the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The literature review focused, amongst others, on a conceptualisation of social media use, the prevalence of social media use among adolescents, the benefits and risks related to social media use and adolescence as a developmental stage. In Chapter 1, the ecological systems theory was described as the theoretical framework for the study.

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

The researcher achieved this objective by means of the presentation of the empirical findings in Chapter 3. The research findings showed that the participants used social media on a daily basis and spent long periods of time on social media. They mainly used it to connect with others and to share school-related information.

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

The empirical findings on the participants' perceptions of benefits and risks related to social media use were presented in Chapter 3. The findings showed that more risks than benefits were highlighted by the participants. The participants also shared concerns about risks to the personal safety of adolescents who use social media.

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

The participants' suggestions for ensuring that adolescents would use social media optimally mainly focused on educating adolescents on responsible social media use. In this way, adolescents can take greater responsibility for their social media use. The empirical findings are presented in Chapter 3.

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

The participants suggested that the harmful effects of social media use could be curbed by parents monitoring adolescents' social media use. Furthermore, parents, teachers and social workers must be informed about the benefits and risks of social media use so that they can guide adolescents in how to use social media in a safe and responsible way. The findings are presented in Chapter 3.

The research question for the study was as follows: "*What are young adult's reflections on experiences of using social media in adolescents?*" Based on the achievement of the goal and objectives of the research, it can be concluded that the research question has been answered.

4.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social media use has become an integral part of modern life and adolescents have been found to be the most active users. Although social media use has many potential benefits, it also involves many potential risks to the social, emotional, cognitive, physical well-being and safety of the adolescents. Social workers, parents, teachers, schools and adolescents themselves could collaborate on ways to enhance the positive use of social media and to prevent the potential harmful effects thereof on adolescents. Future research can play a role in determining these roles.

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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 17 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 APPROVAL LETTER



Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo



12 November 2020

Dear Mrs ML Madikgetla

Project Title: Young adults' reflections on their experiences of social media use during adolescence
Researcher: Mrs ML Madikgetla
Supervisor(s): Dr MP le Roux
Department: Social Work and Criminology
Reference number: 19227362 (HUM014/1020)
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

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof I Pikirayi (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Mr A Bizos; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A dos Santos; Ms KT Govinder; Andrew; Dr P Gutura; Dr E Johnson; Prof D Maree; Mr A Mohamed; Dr I Noomé; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof M Soer; Prof E Taljard; Prof V Thebe; Ms B Tsebe; Ms D Mokalapa

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER



Researcher: Malehlohonolo Lorraine Madikgetla (u19227362)
Degree: MSW Play-based Intervention
Contact details: 082 323 5888

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.

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotheo

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 madikgetlaml@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: _____