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SOCIAL MEDIA PRESSURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON YOUTH BEHAVIOUR AND WELLBEING: A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH AFRICA**Babalo Kundlwana ¹, Samson Nambei Asoba ^{2*}, Nteboheng Patricia Mefi ³, Mateus Vicente Justino ⁴**^{1,2*,3,4} Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth, 4960, Eastern Cape, South AfricaE-mails: ¹ babalozenzo@gmail.com; ^{2*} sasoba@wsu.ac.za (Corresponding author); ³ nmefi@wsu.ac.za; ⁴ mjustino@wsu.ac.za

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Abstract. Social media has become an integral part of young people's daily lives, shaping social interaction, emotional wellbeing, and behavioural choices. While global studies highlight both positive and negative effects, limited qualitative research has explored these dynamics within rural South African contexts. The purpose of this study is to understand how social media affects young people's daily lives. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist approach. It was conducted in the OR Tambo District Municipality, located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, a predominantly rural area characterised by high youth unemployment and widespread social media use. Using purposive and snowball sampling, data were collected from twenty-four (24) social media users using Google Forms as the semi-structured interview guide and administered via WhatsApp. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that social media outcomes in young people's lives are twofold; it may have a positive effect on them and put them at risk. Participants reported motivation, emotional coping, and inspiration, alongside exposure to peer pressure, financial risk, and online scams in the use of social media. They demonstrated critical awareness and self-regulation, and expressed concern about online safety and the need for greater guidance and platform accountability. This study contributes to knowledge by challenging deficit-based narratives that portray young people as passive victims of social media. It foregrounds the rural South Africa social media users' perspective and advances eco-humanistic scholarship by situating social media use within interconnected social, economic, and ethical systems.

Keywords: social media pressure; social media use; youth behaviour; youth wellbeing; South Africa

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JEL Classifications: O03**Additional disciplines:** sociology; psychology**1. Introduction**

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become a pervasive force shaping the lives of young people across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook are not merely tools for communication or entertainment for many youths; they function as central arenas for identity formation, social comparison, belonging, and social interaction (West, Rice & Vella-Brodrick, 2024; Bačík et al., 2025; Gulevičiūtė et al., 2025). Globally, a substantial proportion of adolescents and young adults engage with social media daily, with sustained use influencing both psychological and social processes that underpin their behaviour and wellbeing (Ivančík & Andrassy, 2024, 2025; Pazdur, Tutus & Haag, 2025). This complex digital immersion raises critical questions about how social media exposure can contribute to experiences of peer pressure, emotional stress, and health-related behaviours, particularly in contexts where socioeconomic vulnerability intersects with pervasive digital engagement.

A growing literature underscores the multifaceted influence of social media on youth wellbeing (Pazdur, Tutus & Haag, 2025; Sheng, 2025). Social media use is associated with both positive outcomes, such as social support and access to health information, and negative consequences, including anxiety, depression, and maladaptive comparisons (Sheng, 2025). The literature also indicates that problematic patterns of social media engagement can impair mental health, especially where upward comparison processes and algorithm-driven content contribute to negative self-perceptions (Pazdur, Tutus & Haag, 2025; Tveit & Biele, 2025). For instance, daily social media interactions often involve comparing one's own life with curated depictions of peers or influencers, a process found to predict diminished subjective wellbeing through higher negative affect and lower self-worth among young users (Pazdur, Tutus & Haag, 2025; Sheng, 2025).

Beyond psychological dimensions, social media also shapes behavioural choices. Research indicates that frequent exposure to peers' lifestyles and feedback mechanisms may increase the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours, including substance use and unsafe sexual practices, by normalising such behaviours through peer endorsement and popularity cues (Maas, Bray & Noll, 2019). Relatedly, studies have documented significant associations between social media use and sexual risk behaviour among adolescents, suggesting that peer influence communicated through online platforms can correlate with real-world health outcomes (Maas, Bray & Noll, 2019; Farré et al., 2020; Paulus et al., 2024). These behavioural associations point to the broader role those digital environments play in young people's decision-making contexts.

Despite the prevalence of studies in high-income contexts, there remains a notable gap in qualitative research on how social media dynamics are experienced among youth in rural and under-researched regions of the Global South, such as the OR Tambo District in Eastern Cape, South Africa (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018; De Doncker & McLean, 2022). Rural communities often contend with unique socioeconomic challenges, including limited access to offline resources, economic precarity, and differentiated cultural norms, all of which may moderate how social media influences behaviour and wellbeing (Gregory et al., 2023). To date, there is limited empirical insight into how young people in such contexts interpret and handle social media pressure, upward comparison, risk, and emotional responses. Addressing this gap is essential for grounding global digital wellbeing conversations in diverse lived experiences and for informing culturally sensitive interventions.

2. Research problem

The alarming adverse effects of excessive social media use on young people call for further research to examine how social media pressure influences youth behaviour, emotions, and wellbeing, especially in South African rural areas. Despite positive outcomes of the use of social media, which include social support, access to health information (Sheng, 2025), maintaining closer links with family and friends, there is a great concern of adverse effects of its excessive use (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018; De Doncker & McLean, 2022; West, Rice & Vella-Brodrick, 2024; Sheng, 2025). A previous study indicates that increased exposure to peer-endorsed social media content can normalise risk-taking behaviours (Boer et al., 2021). Other studies have highlighted that excessive use can contribute to earlier sexual initiation, substance use (Boer et al., 2021), depression, maladaptive comparisons (Sheng, 2025), and mental health impairment (Pazdur et al., 2025; Tveit & Biele, 2025). Although the global literature provides important insights into the patterns and motivations of youth social media use, three key limitations remain. First, most studies are conducted in high-income Western contexts, often using quantitative survey designs. Second, limited research examines how rural youth in the Global South integrate social media into their daily socioeconomic realities. Third, while motivations are widely studied, fewer qualitative studies explore how young people themselves interpret and explain their patterns of engagement. In support of the above, Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) conducted a quantitative study to assess the effects of knowledge sharing, habit, and obligation on the use of social media by youth in a rural area of South Africa. Thus, they suggested that a qualitative study of habitual social media use should be undertaken to gain deeper insights into young people's realities in rural South African settings (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Similarly, a quantitative study on the

negative effects of the use of social media among youth in Cape Town, by De Doncker and McLean (2022:6), suggests that a supplementary approach, such as the qualitative method using "in-depth interviews, should prove useful in determining motivations and explanations for some of the findings". They further ascertained that "a more comprehensive study will further elucidate the risk factors associated with excessive social networking, which will undoubtedly benefit all social media users" (De Doncker & McLean, 2022:6). There is therefore insufficient qualitative evidence from rural South African settings that explains how local economic conditions, cultural norms and digital access realities shape patterns and motivations of social media use. As social media continues to evolve, West et al. (2024) suggest that ongoing research into its influence on the development and wellbeing of adolescents and young people is critical.

In response to this gap, the present study seeks to understand how social media affects young people's daily lives within a rural South African context. This gap is particularly relevant in districts such as OR Tambo, where high unemployment, geographic marginalisation and digital expansion intersect. Thus, this study's objectives are:

- Objective 1: To explore patterns and motivations of social media use among young people in the OR Tambo District.
- Objective 2: To examine how social media exposure contributes to peer pressure, self-comparison, and lifestyle expectations among young people.
- Objective 3: To investigate the influence of social media on youth behaviour in relation to engagement in risky activities.
- Objective 4: To explore the effects of social media use on young people's emotional wellbeing, coping strategies, and perceptions of online safety.

This study assumes that understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for scholarly knowledge but also for designing targeted digital literacy programmes, psychosocial support strategies, and public health interventions that respond authentically to young people's realities in rural South African settings. Such insights can help bridge the gap between global theoretical frameworks and local lived experiences, advancing a more inclusive eco-humanistic understanding of the digital age.

4. Literature review

Patterns and motivations of social media use among young people

The use of social media has been indisputably integrated into young people's everyday lives, serving multiple social, emotional, and informational functions. Studies consistently show that adolescents and young adults use social media platforms primarily for communication, entertainment, information-seeking and self-expression (Verduyn et al., 2017). These platforms provide spaces for maintaining friendships, forming identities and accessing social support, particularly during transitional life stages.

During adolescence and early adulthood, identity formation, peer approval, and belonging become central concerns, and social media can offer visible, immediate feedback through likes, comments, and shares (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2018). Thus, this interactive structure may give motivations for social media use, reinforce continued engagement and shape how young people present themselves online. It has been observed that a potential social media user can be motivated to be an active or passive user. Active use (such as messaging, commenting, and content creation) is often associated with more positive outcomes. In contrast, passive consumption (scrolling and viewing others' posts) has been linked to lower wellbeing (Verduyn et al., 2017). Passive use may increase opportunities for upward comparison and feelings of exclusion, particularly when users observe curated portrayals of peers' success (Vogel et al., 2014). In contrast, active engagement may strengthen social capital and perceived social support (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Motivations for use, therefore, matter, as they shape how young people interact with content and peers online.

Beyond interpersonal motives, social media use is also shaped by broader structural conditions. In low- and middle-income contexts, digital platforms serve as tools for economic survival, information access, and opportunity-seeking. In South Africa, social media is believed to be used by youth to seek employment information, follow news and escape daily stressors (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018). Similarly, research in other African contexts shows that young people use social media for small-business promotion, informal trading, and networking (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). These uses could also explain how digital spaces become integrated into livelihood strategies where unemployment levels are high.

Social media exposure, peer comparison, and lifestyle expectations

Previous research has shown that when young users frequently interpret online portrayals as realistic benchmarks, despite knowing that content is often edited or exaggerated, they are more likely to feel pressured to achieve similar lifestyles, appearances, or relationships, even when such standards are unattainable (Kross et al., 2013). Similarly, another research indicates that passive exposure to idealised profiles can reduce immediate life satisfaction and mood (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2016). However, another central concern in social media research is the impact of social comparison on users. Platforms encourage constant exposure to curated images of success, beauty and material achievement, which can influence how young people evaluate themselves. Research shows that upward social comparison on social media is associated with lower self-esteem and increased negative affect (Vogel et al., 2014; Dinh, & Lee, 2025)

Social comparison theory explains that individuals evaluate their own abilities and worth by comparing themselves to others, particularly when objective standards are absent (Festinger, 1954). In digital environments, where idealised self-presentations are common, these comparisons become frequent and highly visible. Thus, this frequent social comparison can increase depressive symptoms over time (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015), as image-based platforms have been linked to body dissatisfaction and appearance-related concerns, especially among young women (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). It has been observed that peer approval mechanisms such as likes, comments, and follower count can further reinforce comparisons and perceived social status. However, emerging research suggests that the impact of social comparison is not uniform. Some adolescents engage in critical evaluation of online content and recognise selective self-presentation, which may buffer negative outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2022). This indicates that individual interpretation and digital literacy may play an important role in shaping emotional responses.

Influence of social media on youth behaviour and risk engagement

Beyond emotional effects, social media has been linked to behavioural outcomes, including engagement in risky activities. Research indicates that social media can normalise risk-taking behaviours by increasing exposure to peer-endorsed content related to substance use, unsafe sexual practices and fraudulent opportunities (Boer et al., 2021). According to Social Learning Theory, individuals learn behaviours by observing and imitating others, particularly when those behaviours appear rewarded. In digital environments, visible peer approval through likes and shares may function as such reinforcement, making certain behaviours appear socially acceptable or desirable.

Exposure to alcohol-related content on social networking sites has been associated with increased alcohol use among adolescents and young adults (Litt & Stock, 2011). Online peer networks can amplify perceived norms, creating the impression that certain behaviours are widespread even when they are not. Adolescents are more likely to consider or engage in risky behaviour when such behaviour is portrayed positively or presented as socially rewarding online (Kross et al., 2013). This phenomenon may increase pressure to conform. In addition to the above, financial and economic risks have become increasingly prominent. Young people may encounter online gambling promotions, cryptocurrency schemes, fraudulent job advertisements and deceptive marketing practices. Studies indicate that exposure to online gambling content predicts higher gambling intention among youth (Derevensky et al., 2019; Varmus et al., 2026). In contexts characterised by unemployment and economic hardship, promises of quick financial gain may carry strong appeal. This is particularly relevant in South Africa,

where youth unemployment remains structurally high and digital platforms often serve as informal job search spaces (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018).

Emotional and psychological effects of social media on youth wellbeing and coping

Previous research has also associated heavy or problematic social media use with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms and reduced life satisfaction, although effect sizes vary (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Similarly, another study indicates that moderate use may not be harmful, while excessive or compulsive engagement is more strongly associated with psychological distress (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020). However, the distinction between active and passive use is particularly significant in this matter. Passive consumption of content, such as scrolling without interaction, has been linked to increased envy, rumination, and negative mood (Verduyn et al., 2017). In contrast, active engagement, including messaging and supportive interactions, may enhance feelings of social connectedness. This suggests that the emotional consequences of social media depend not merely on duration of use but on patterns of interaction.

It has been observed that negative emotional experiences are frequently tied to cyberbullying, fear of missing out (FoMO) and constant comparison with peers (Twenge et al., 2018). Cyberbullying has been consistently associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation among adolescents (Kowalski et al., 2014). Unlike traditional bullying, online harassment can occur continuously and reach wide audiences, intensifying emotional impact. At the same time, social media can provide meaningful emotional support. Online communities may offer spaces for self-expression, identity exploration and peer solidarity, particularly for marginalised youth (Best, Manktelow & Taylor, 2014). During periods of stress, such as academic pressure or unemployment, digital platforms may facilitate access to encouragement, information and coping resources (Best, Manktelow & Taylor, 2014; Kozová et al., 2025). COPING strategies vary widely. Drawing on Stress and Coping Theory, young people may adopt problem-focused coping strategies, such as limiting screen time, blocking harmful users, or adjusting privacy settings, or emotion-focused strategies, such as seeking reassurance and social support online.

It has been reported that concerns about privacy breaches, identity theft, online scams and harassment may generate anxiety, particularly in contexts where digital literacy training is limited (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). This indicates that perceptions of online safety can also influence emotional wellbeing. Livingstone and Smith (2014) argue that young people often navigate online risks through trial and error rather than structured guidance, increasing vulnerability. In environments marked by socioeconomic hardship, exposure to exploitative schemes and misinformation may further heighten emotional strain. The literature, therefore, highlights a dual impact of social media on youth wellbeing, offering both emotional support and psychological strain.

4. Research design and methodology

Research paradigm

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' lived experiences and meanings. This paradigm was appropriate for exploring how young people perceive, experience, and interpret social media pressure within their social and digital environments.

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into participants' subjective experiences of social media use, pressure, behaviour, and wellbeing. This approach enabled rich, descriptive accounts that could not be captured through quantitative methods.

Research design

The study employed an exploratory qualitative research design, suitable for investigating and understanding phenomena within specific social contexts. This design enabled the capture of diverse perspectives and facilitated a deeper understanding of how social media pressure manifests in everyday life.

Target population

The study was conducted in OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The target population consisted primarily of young people aged 18 and above, with participation also open to older individuals who actively use social media platforms. All participants were required to be active users of at least one social media platform.

Sampling techniques and sample size

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria of active social media use and willingness to share personal experiences. This was complemented by snowball sampling, in which initial participants referred others in their social networks. These non-probability sampling techniques were appropriate for accessing information-rich participants within a community-based setting. A total of 24 participants completed the interview guide. The final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new ideas, insights or themes emerge from additional data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Saturation was reached before and confirmed at the 24-response mark, as recurring patterns were evident across participants.

Data collection methods

Data were collected using an online semi-structured interview guide developed in alignment with the study objectives. The guide consisted of open-ended questions structured around the four study objectives, enabling participants to provide detailed qualitative responses. The instrument was created using Google Forms and distributed to participants via WhatsApp due to its accessibility and widespread use among youth in the study area. Data collection commenced on 03 October 2025 and continued for three weeks, concluding on 24 October 2025. The Google Form was subsequently configured to stop accepting responses once sufficient qualitative data had been obtained for analysis. All responses were automatically recorded within the platform and downloaded for thematic analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarisation, coding, theme development, and refinement. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meanings across participants' responses while remaining grounded in the data. Themes were developed inductively and organised according to the study's research objectives.

5. Data presentation and data analysis***Demographic characteristics of participants***

This qualitative study involved twenty-four (24) participants, all of whom were active users of social media and residents of the OR Tambo District municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The demographic characteristics presented below provide contextual background to the participants whose experiences and perspectives informed the study findings. In terms of gender, the sample comprised thirteen female participants and eleven male participants, reflecting a relatively balanced representation of male and female perspectives. This balance allowed for diverse insights into how social media pressure is experienced across genders. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 37 years. Most participants were young adults, with the majority aged 21-25, which aligns with the study's focus on youth experiences with social media. Specifically, one participant was 19 years old, one was 20 years old, four were 21 years old, three were 22 years old, four were 23 years old, three were 24 years old, and three were 25 years old. In addition, one participant was 26 years old, two were 27 years old, one was 29

years old, and one was 37 years old. The inclusion of a small number of older participants added additional perspectives and enriched the data without detracting from the study's primary youth focus.

Regarding social media use, participants reported engagement with multiple platforms. WhatsApp was the most used platform, with nineteen participants indicating regular use, highlighting its central role in everyday communication and social interaction. TikTok was used by eleven participants, reflecting its popularity for entertainment and trend-based content. Facebook was reported by nine participants, suggesting its continued relevance for social networking and community engagement. A smaller number of participants reported using Instagram (2) and Twitter (1). Many participants indicated they used more than one platform, suggesting overlapping digital spaces where social interaction, peer comparison, and social media pressure may occur.

Overall, the demographic profile confirms that the participants were active, diverse social media users, well-positioned to provide rich, in-depth accounts of how social media pressure influences behaviour and wellbeing in a rural South African context.

Interpretations of results

Objective 1: To explore patterns and motivations of social media use among young people in the OR Tambo District.

This section presents findings on participants' social media use patterns and motivations for engaging with social media. The analysis draws on responses to the following questions:

- What do you usually do on social media?
- Why do you use social media?

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following an inductive approach in which recurring patterns and meanings were identified across participants' responses. Three main themes emerged: (1) social media as a space for entertainment and passive consumption, (2) social media as a tool for social connection, and (3) social media as a resource for economic and educational opportunities.

Social media as a space for entertainment and passive consumption

A dominant pattern across participants' responses was the use of social media primarily for entertainment and passive consumption. Many participants described spending time watching videos, scrolling through posts, and viewing updates, particularly on platforms such as TikTok and Facebook. This form of use required minimal interaction and was often described as habitual or routine.

One participant stated simply: *"Watching videos"* (P2)

Similarly, another participant explained: *"Scrolling through posts, watching videos"* (P19)

Several participants indicated that this form of engagement served as a way to relax, pass the time, or escape boredom, reinforcing social media's role as a leisure activity. For example, one participant noted: *"For fun as a hobby"* (P8)

Another participant described social media as a means of filling idle time: *"Pass time"* (P13)

These responses suggest that, for many young people, social media serves as a readily accessible source of entertainment, with content consumed rather than actively created. The findings indicate that entertainment-driven and passive social media use is a central feature of participants' digital lives. This pattern highlights the potential for prolonged exposure to online content, which may increase vulnerability to social comparison and emotional influence, issues explored further in subsequent objectives.

Social media as a tool for social connection and relationship maintenance

Another prominent theme was the use of social media to maintain relationships and social connectedness. Participants frequently reported using social media to communicate with friends and family, particularly through messaging and status features on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

One participant explained: *“Chatting with friends and family. Also checking groups for work”* (P13)

Similarly, another participant noted: *“Keeping up with friends and family on WhatsApp”* (P15)

Social media was described as especially valuable for maintaining connections across distance. One participant stated: *“To keep in touch with families and friends regardless of the distance and entertainment”* (P4)

For some participants, social media served as a way to observe others’ lives without active participation, as illustrated by one participant who remarked: *“I hardly post!”* (P15)

The statements suggest that while social connection is important, not all participants feel the need to present themselves online; instead, they choose to remain active observers. The findings demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in sustaining interpersonal relationships and social belonging. The emphasis on observation rather than participation for some participants suggests varied levels of engagement, which may influence how social pressure and comparison are experienced.

Social media as a resource for economic, educational and personal development opportunities

A particularly important theme emerging from the data was the use of social media as a practical resource for job seeking, business promotion, learning, and self-improvement. Several participants described using social media platforms to search for employment opportunities, promote small businesses, and gain new skills.

One participant explained in detail: *“Posting pictures, marketing, I am doing sales, looking for customers so that my business can grow and also applying for jobs when there is a suitable position for me”* (P6)

Similarly, another participant stated: *“Applying for jobs and doing my small business”* (P16)

Participants also highlighted the role of social media in learning and inspiration. One participant noted: *“To learn new things”* (P3)

Another participant elaborated on how social media content motivated personal resilience: *“I get inspired not to give up when I don’t make sales... I see people who started from a difficult path, but at the end of the day they win”* (P6)

In addition, social media was used for school-related purposes, as one participant explained: *“Scrolling on TikTok, watching videos, searching for school-related things”* (P20)

The findings reveal that social media is not only a space for leisure and connection but also a critical platform for economic survival, learning, and self-development. This instrumental use reflects the socioeconomic realities many young people face. It provides important context for understanding how social media pressure may be intertwined with aspirations, comparison, and perceived success.

Summary of Objective 1 Findings

Overall, the findings show that young people in the OR Tambo District use social media in multifaceted ways, combining entertainment, social connection, and economic or educational pursuits. These overlapping patterns of use suggest that social media occupies a central position in participants’ daily lives, shaping not only how they communicate and relax, but also how they seek opportunities and motivation. This complexity provides an essential foundation for understanding how social media pressure may influence behaviour and wellbeing, as explored in subsequent objectives.

Objective 2: To examine how social media exposure contributes to peer pressure, self-comparison, and lifestyle expectations among young people.

This section presents findings on participants' experiences with social media exposure, peer comparison, and perceived lifestyle expectations. The analysis draws on responses to the following questions:

- *When you see people on social media showing their cars, jobs, nice clothes, houses, or relationships, how does it make you feel?*
- *Have you ever compared yourself to what you see online? Can you give an example?*
- *Do you feel pressure to have the same things or lifestyle as people on social media? Please explain.*

Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (1) social media as a source of inspiration and positive motivation, (2) Selective and constructive self-comparison, and (3) Resistance to perceived lifestyle pressure.

Social media as a source of inspiration and positive motivation

A dominant theme across participants' responses was the interpretation of social media content as inspirational rather than distressing. When exposed to images of success, such as cars, houses, jobs, or relationships, many participants reported feelings of happiness, encouragement, and motivation to improve their own lives.

One participant explained: *"I feel so happy, and when I see people with cars and houses, I feel so motivated and be like one day it will be me"* (P5)

Similarly, another participant stated: *"It inspires me to work hard to achieve my goals"* (P10)

Several participants framed others' success as evidence that achievement is possible, rather than as a threat to their own self-worth: *"I always feel happy to see people succeed"* (P16)

Others expressed inspiration grounded in personal values and faith: *"I feel happy because of the heart of God I have"* (P21)

These responses suggest that participants often interpret aspirational content through a lens of hope and future orientation, rather than immediate dissatisfaction. The findings indicate that social media exposure frequently functions as a motivational catalyst, encouraging young people to aspire towards personal and economic goals. Rather than generating distress, visible success online is often reframed as achievable and desirable in the long term.

Selective and constructive self-comparison

While many participants initially denied engaging in comparison, deeper responses revealed instances of selective and constructive self-comparison. These comparisons were typically framed as self-improvement rather than competition or envy.

One participant reflected: *"I envied their success in a good way... one day this would be me"* (P5)

Others described comparison as motivational, prompting behavioural change: *"Yes, by seeing someone exercising, that motivated me to start training"* (P10)

Some participants compared themselves to peers within familiar social circles, such as friends or relatives: *"I saw my cousin purchasing a car"* (P17)

Notably, one participant expressed mixed emotions when comparison highlighted missed opportunities: *"I saw a former schoolmate graduating, and I felt bad somehow... but I was happy for her"* (P19)

At the same time, several participants actively rejected comparison, citing upbringing or personal identity: *"Circumstances are not the same, that's how I was raised"* (P2) *"Online is fake!"* (P15)

These findings suggest that self-comparison among participants is contextual and moderated. While overt comparison is often denied, subtle and constructive comparison occurs, particularly when it aligns with personal goals. Comparison becomes problematic only when it highlights perceived personal shortcomings.

Resistance to perceived lifestyle pressure

Despite exposure to aspirational lifestyles online, most participants reported little to no perceived pressure to replicate what they see on social media. Many articulated a strong sense of autonomy and personal values, emphasising self-determination over imitation.

One participant stated firmly: *"I do my own things; I do not copy what others do"* (P4)

Others expressed awareness of the risks associated with comparison: *"If I'm comparing myself with them, I might end up doing absurd things"* (P5)

Several participants rejected pressure explicitly: *"No, I don't feel any pressure"* (P6)

"No!" (P11)

However, a small number of participants acknowledged conditional pressure, particularly related to long-term aspirations: *"Sometimes... I do want to have things like my own house, car and family"* (P8)

Overall, participants demonstrated a strong capacity to resist social media-driven lifestyle pressure, often grounded in personal values, awareness of online realities, and future-oriented thinking. While aspirations exist, they are not commonly experienced as coercive or distressing pressure.

Summary of Objective 2 Findings

The findings reveal that social media exposure among young people in the OR Tambo District is predominantly experienced as inspirational rather than oppressive. Participants engage in selective self-comparison, often framed as motivation rather than competition, and largely resist lifestyle pressure through personal agency and critical awareness. These findings complicate dominant narratives that portray social media solely as harmful, highlighting the importance of contextual and individual interpretations.

Objective 3: To investigate the influence of social media on youth behaviour in relation to engagement in risky activities.

This section presents findings on how social media influences young people's behaviour, particularly regarding risk assessment, exposure to harmful online activities, and strategies for assessing online safety. The analysis is based on responses to the following questions:

- *Have you ever thought about doing something risky because of social media?*
- *Do you know anyone who got into trouble, like scams, drugs, or unsafe work, because of social media?*
- *How do you know if something online is safe or dangerous?*

Thematic analysis identified four key themes: (1) Perceived vulnerability to online financial risks, (2) Peer influence and normalisation of risky behaviour, (3) Awareness of social media-related harm through lived and observed experiences, and (4) Development of informal online safety strategies.

Perceived vulnerability to online financial risks

A recurring theme in participants' responses was exposure to financially risky opportunities, particularly those promising quick or easy income. While some participants reported resisting such opportunities, others acknowledged either considering or engaging in them.

One participant reflected: *"Yes, I almost tried making money quickly"* (P4)

Similarly, another participant admitted: *"I tried to make money online very quickly, but I failed"* (P8)

Participants also described engagement with online betting platforms: *"Yes, through Betway"* (P6)

"Yes, bet way" (P14)

Some participants recounted direct experiences of financial loss: *"I got scammed once, on Facebook. So now I do nothing!"* (P9)

These responses suggest that financial vulnerability and the appeal of rapid economic gain increase susceptibility to risky online behaviour.

The findings indicate that social media exposes young people to financial risks disguised as opportunities, particularly within contexts of economic hardship. While not all participants acted on these opportunities, the consideration alone reflects heightened vulnerability driven by socioeconomic pressures.

Peer influence and the normalisation of risky behaviour

Peer pressure emerged as a contributing factor in shaping risky decision-making. Some participants explicitly linked their consideration of risky behaviour to social influence encountered online.

One participant stated: *"Yes, because of peer pressure"* (P7)

The visibility of others engaging in risky or questionable activities normalises such behaviour, making it acceptable or achievable. This normalisation was particularly evident in relation to online betting and quick-money schemes.

Conversely, other participants expressed strong moral or personal resistance to risk-taking: *"No, that is so wrong, and at the end of the day, anything done in darkness there'll be time for it to be exposed in light"* (P5)

These findings suggest that while peer influence can normalise risky behaviour on social media, individual values and moral frameworks play an important moderating role. Risk engagement is therefore not uniform but mediated by personal beliefs and social context.

Awareness of social media-related harm through lived and observed experiences

Participants demonstrated awareness of the dangers of social media through both personal experiences and observations of others' misfortune. Scams were the most frequently cited form of harm.

One participant recounted: *"One of my friends got scammed about getting a job, and he paid them, and then the person blocked him"* (P8)

Another described a more severe case involving human trafficking: *"This Russian thing where we believed some influencers about jobs only to find out that's human trafficking"* (P4)

Repeated narratives of scams involving fake online sellers were also common: *"A friend... sent the money, then the person blocked her"* (P6)

These experiences heighten participants' caution and scepticism towards online opportunities.

The findings reveal that awareness of harm is often shaped through shared community experiences, reinforcing caution and mistrust. Exposure to others' negative experiences plays a key role in shaping safer online behaviour.

Development of informal online safety and risk-assessment strategies

Despite limited formal guidance, participants described various self-developed strategies to determine whether online content or opportunities were safe. Common practices included asking questions, conducting online searches, seeking verification, and consulting trusted networks.

One participant explained: *"I do thorough research first"* (P3)

Others emphasised collective verification: *"I ask around if there is anyone aware of this"* (P6)

Digital tools were also used as safety mechanisms: *"Check with Google or ChatGPT"* (P17)

Some participants avoided online risks entirely: *"I don't join anything on social media"* (P14)

These findings indicate that young people actively develop informal digital literacy practices to manage online risk. At the same time, these strategies demonstrate agency and awareness, their effectiveness varies, highlighting the need for structured digital safety education.

Summary of Objective 3 Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media significantly influences youth behaviour by exposing young people to financial risks, peer-driven pressure, and unsafe opportunities. While some participants experienced

harm directly, others learned through observation and adapted their behaviour accordingly. Importantly, young people are not passive recipients of risk; they actively employ coping and evaluation strategies, though these remain informal and unevenly applied.

Objective 4: To explore the effects of social media use on young people's emotional wellbeing, coping strategies, and perceptions of online safety.

This section presents findings on participants' emotional experiences with social media use, their coping strategies, and their views on how social media can be made safer and less stressful. The analysis is based on responses to the following questions:

- *How does using social media make you feel most of the time?*
- *What advice would you give to other young people about using social media safely?*
- *What would you like to see change on social media to make it safer or less stressful for young people?*

Thematic analysis generated four key themes: (1) Predominantly positive emotional experiences with intermittent emotional strain, (2) social media as a coping and mood-regulation tool, (3) Emphasis on personal responsibility and self-regulation, and (4) Demand for structural safeguards and adult guidance in digital spaces.

Predominantly positive emotional experiences with intermittent emotional strain

Most participants described their emotional experiences of social media use as largely positive, frequently using terms such as *happy* and *motivated*. These emotions were often associated with entertainment, inspiration, and exposure to others' achievements.

One participant stated: *"Happy and motivated"* (P2)

Another explained: *"Happy because I see a lot of achievements"* (P8)

For several participants, positive emotions were consistent but not constant. Some acknowledged moments of stress, boredom, or emotional neutrality: *"Sometimes happy when I'm distressed, sometimes stressed it depends"* (P5)

"I don't feel anything, but sometimes I feel bored" (P6)

A small number of participants emphasised emotional detachment rather than emotional impact: *"Unbothered"* (P13)

The findings suggest that social media use is generally associated with positive emotional states, though these are occasionally interrupted by stress or emotional disengagement. This indicates that emotional wellbeing outcomes are fluid and dependent on context, content, and individual disposition.

Social media as a coping and mood-regulation tool

Participants frequently described using social media as a coping mechanism to manage stress, sadness, or boredom. Platforms such as TikTok were explicitly mentioned as sources of humour and emotional relief.

One participant explained: *"I use social media most of the time to relieve stress or boredom"* (P4)

Another participant shared: *"Sometimes when I'm sad, I usually watch funny videos on TikTok, and I experience some changes in my mood"* (P7)

Others framed social media as a space for emotional release and calmness: *"Most of the time I use social media to cool off my head and release stress"* (P12)

In some cases, coping was tied to personal or spiritual expression: *"Happy, because it gives me more time to share the word of GOD"* (P17)

These findings highlight social media's role as an accessible emotional coping resource, particularly in contexts where alternative recreational or psychosocial support options may be limited. However, reliance on social media for mood regulation may also increase exposure to stress-inducing content.

Emphasis on personal responsibility and self-regulation

When advising others on safe social media use, participants strongly emphasised personal responsibility, critical thinking, and self-regulation. A dominant message across responses was the importance of avoiding comparison and resisting pressure.

Several participants advised: *“Don’t compare yourself to others”* (P6)

“Be in your lane!” (P17)

Others stressed caution in posting and engagement: *“Think first about what you post, don’t share personal information”* (P1)

Participants also highlighted the dual nature of social media: *“Social media is a tool to change your life or destroy it”* (P11)

Some responses reflected scepticism and withdrawal as coping strategies: *“Stop using social media, it’s a very toxic and consuming environment”* (P16)

The findings reveal a strong internalisation of self-monitoring and individual accountability among participants. While this reflects awareness and maturity, it also suggests that young people may place the burden of safety primarily on themselves rather than on platform structures.

Demand for structural safeguards and adult guidance in digital spaces

Beyond individual responsibility, participants expressed a clear desire for system-level changes to make social media safer. Concerns centred on scams, fake content, and unsafe job advertisements.

One participant stated: *“Safer job adverts”* (P2)

Others called for stronger verification mechanisms: *“Everyone must log in with his or her name... it must require identity documents”* (P6)

Adult involvement was frequently emphasised: *“More guidance from adults”* (P9)

Some participants advocated for content regulation: *“Before posting a video, it must be checked”* (P20)

These findings indicate that while young people practise individual caution, they also recognise the need for institutional accountability, adult guidance, and regulatory oversight. Participants perceive safety as a shared responsibility between users, communities, and social media platforms.

Summary of Objective 4 Findings

The findings show that social media use generally supports positive emotional wellbeing and coping, while also presenting moments of stress and emotional disengagement. Young people actively regulate their use, promote personal responsibility, and demonstrate awareness of online risks. However, they also call for stronger protective measures and guidance, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that combine individual agency with structural support.

6. Discussion

This study explored how social media pressure influences youth behaviour and wellbeing in the OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape, South Africa, with particular attention to patterns of use, peer comparison, risk behaviour, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies. The findings contribute to existing literature by offering contextually grounded, qualitative insights from a rural South African setting, an area that remains under-represented in global social media research.

Patterns and motivations of social media use

The findings demonstrate that young people use social media in multifunctional ways, combining entertainment, social connection, economic activity, and learning. This aligns with existing research indicating that youth engagement with social media is not homogeneous but shaped by both personal needs and contextual realities

(Verduyn et al., 2017). Rather than being solely recreational, social media in this study served as an everyday livelihood and information tool, particularly for job searching and small-business promotion. These findings support evidence from South Africa showing that youth in resource-constrained contexts often rely on digital platforms to compensate for limited offline opportunities (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018). From an eco-humanistic perspective, this reflects how digital environments become embedded within broader socioeconomic ecosystems, influencing how young people adapt to structural inequalities rather than merely consuming content for pleasure. Importantly, the dominance of passive activities such as scrolling and video viewing mirrors global trends identified by Verduyn et al. (2017), who caution that passive consumption may carry different psychological implications than active engagement. This distinction becomes relevant when interpreting later findings on emotional wellbeing and comparison.

Peer comparison, inspiration, and lifestyle expectations

Contrary to dominant narratives that frame social media primarily as a source of psychological harm, this study found that exposure to others' success was more often interpreted as inspirational rather than distressing. Participants commonly described feelings of motivation, hope, and future orientation when encountering aspirational content. This finding nuances earlier work by Kross et al. (2013), which associated social media use with declines in wellbeing, by suggesting that interpretation and context matter.

At the same time, evidence of selective and constructive self-comparison emerged. While many participants initially rejected the idea of comparison, deeper accounts revealed moments when comparison stimulated self-reflection or goal-setting. This supports Vogel et al.'s (2014) argument that social comparison on social media is not inherently harmful, but its impact depends on whether it is upward, downward, or internalised as pressure. Notably, most participants resisted pressure to adopt a lifestyle, emphasising personal agency and long-term aspirations rather than immediate imitation. This resistance contrasts with findings from high-income contexts where fear of missing out and social validation are more prominent (Twenge et al., 2018). The difference may be explained by contextual factors, including economic realities and cultural norms that encourage patience, resilience, and incremental success.

Social media and risky behaviour

The findings on risky behaviour reveal a complex interaction among vulnerability, peer influence, and awareness. While many participants denied engaging in risky activities, several acknowledged considering or experiencing financial risks such as online scams, betting, and deceptive job offers. This aligns with Boer et al. (2021), who found associations between problematic social media use and health-risk behaviours, particularly among youth facing socioeconomic stress.

Importantly, risk was not framed as recklessness but as situated decision-making under conditions of limited opportunity. Attempts to "make money quickly" reflected structural unemployment rather than moral failure. This echoes eco-humanistic concerns about how digital platforms interact with fragile socioeconomic systems, often amplifying risk for already vulnerable populations.

Participants' awareness of scams and human trafficking through community narratives reinforces findings that vicarious experience plays a key role in shaping digital caution (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Rather than disengaging entirely, young people adapted by developing informal safety practices, indicating learning rather than passivity.

Emotional wellbeing and coping strategies

Consistent with much of the literature, social media use was associated with predominantly positive emotional states, including happiness, motivation, and emotional relief (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Participants frequently

reported using social media to manage boredom, stress, and low mood, supporting the finding that digital spaces can provide short-term emotional regulation (Verduyn et al., 2017).

However, emotional experiences were not uniform. Some participants reported stress, boredom, or emotional detachment, reflecting the mixed outcomes noted in broader studies (Twenge et al., 2018). These findings reinforce the argument that emotional impacts are content- and context-dependent, rather than inherent to social media itself.

A notable contribution of this study is the strong emphasis participants placed on self-regulation and personal responsibility. Advice to others consistently centred on avoiding comparison, thinking critically, and limiting engagement with harmful content. While this reflects digital awareness, it also suggests a concerning trend where young people internalise responsibility for safety, echoing critiques that platform accountability is often shifted onto users (Boer et al., 2021).

Perceptions of safety and structural responsibility

Participants' calls for safer job advertising, identity verification, adult guidance, and content regulation point to a recognition that individual caution alone is insufficient. This resonates with emerging scholarship that argues for shared responsibility among users, communities, platforms, and policymakers (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). From an eco-humanistic standpoint, these findings highlight the need for ethical digital environments that prioritise human wellbeing over unchecked engagement or profit. Participants' emphasis on adult guidance further underscores the interdependence between generations in navigating digital ecosystems, particularly in rural contexts where formal digital literacy programmes may be limited.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media pressure on youth behaviour and wellbeing within the OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape, South Africa, drawing on qualitative insights from young social media users. The findings demonstrate that social media is deeply integrated in young people's everyday lives, functioning simultaneously as a space for connection, inspiration, emotional regulation, and economic exploration. Rather than viewing social media solely as a source of harm, participants articulated nuanced experiences characterised by both opportunities and risks.

Importantly, the study revealed that young people are not passive recipients of social media influence. Many participants demonstrated agency, critical awareness, and adaptive strategies in navigating online spaces, particularly in resisting unhealthy comparison and managing emotional responses. Nevertheless, exposure to risky online activities, including financial scams and deceptive job opportunities, highlights the vulnerability of youth operating within constrained socioeconomic environments. Emotional wellbeing outcomes were similarly mixed, with social media serving as both a coping mechanism and, at times, a source of stress or disengagement. From an eco-humanistic perspective, these findings underscore the interconnectedness of digital platforms, human wellbeing, and broader social and economic systems. Social media pressure cannot be understood in isolation from structural inequalities, limited employment opportunities, and uneven access to digital literacy support. The study, therefore, contributes context-specific evidence that calls for balanced approaches recognising both individual agency and systemic responsibility.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. *First*, there is a need for context-sensitive digital literacy programmes that go beyond technical skills to include critical engagement, emotional awareness, and online risk assessment. Such programmes should be integrated into schools, community centres, and youth

development initiatives, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas. *Second*, parents, educators, and community leaders should play a more active role in guiding young people's social media use. Participants' calls for adult guidance suggest that intergenerational dialogue can strengthen safe and reflective digital practices without resorting to restrictive or punitive approaches. *Third*, social media platforms and relevant authorities should strengthen mechanisms to protect young users, particularly by regulating online job advertisements, enhancing identity verification processes, and improving reporting systems for scams and harmful content. Responsibility for online safety should not rest solely on individual users but should be shared across digital ecosystems. *Finally*, future research should extend this inquiry by incorporating longitudinal designs and comparative studies across different socioeconomic contexts. Such work would deepen understanding of how social media pressure evolves and how digital environments can be shaped to support sustainable human wellbeing.

In conclusion, fostering healthier digital spaces for young people requires a holistic, eco-humanistic approach that recognises social media as both a resource and a risk. By aligning individual agency with structural support, it is possible to promote digital environments that enhance, rather than undermine, youth wellbeing and development.

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