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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON YOUTH***Sixolile Nyusani¹, Anathi Beauty Mabungela²**¹Walter Sisulu University, South Africa²University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South AfricaE-mail: ¹ 218142986@mywsu.ac.za; ² anathiibeaury@gmail.com*Received 25 July 2025; accepted 15 September 2025; published 30 December 2025*

Abstract. This paper reviews the mental health impacts of social media on youth, defined by the World Youth Report as individuals aged 15 to 24 within the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, and Snapchat have become extremely important to how youth interact; however, social media has been proven to have both positive and negative impacts on their mental wellbeing. This systematic review examined qualitative studies that sought to explore the relationship between the usage of social media and its mental health repercussions, particularly anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. The review combines findings from previous qualitative research, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations for mental health interventions for youth who use social media. Data collection involved meta-analysis of various qualitative approaches, such as interviews and focus groups, providing a deep understanding of the experiences and perspectives of youth and key informants, including parents and mental health professionals. This review paper aims to highlight areas of concern, formulate or enforce strategies that will result in healthier social media usage, offer valuable information for educators and mental health practitioners, and assist policymakers in establishing policies that seek to promote healthier social media usage.

Keywords: anxiety; depression; mental health; self-esteem

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1. Introduction

Increased social media usage has created a complex relationship between youth and mental wellbeing (Simth & Anderson, 2020; Ali et al., 2022). Among youth in Mthatha, social media platforms are frequently used to maintain social connections, spread information, and as a source of entertainment. While social media offers several benefits, such as enhancing social connectedness and spreading information, it also poses risks to youth mental health. The same authors state that qualitative research indicates that constant exposure to social media platforms can result in low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression among youth. Youths in Mthatha, like many others globally, may experience challenges related to negative social comparisons, cyberbullying, and the pressure to conform to digital norms (Beyens, Frison & Eggermont, 2016). "Youth" typically encompasses individuals aged 15 to 24 (World Youth Report, 2021). Significant physical, emotional, and social changes mark this developmental stage. It is a period characterised by identity formation, increased autonomy, and susceptibility to peer influence. The United Nations defines youth as the transition phase between adolescence and adulthood,

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emphasising the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individuals in this age group (United Nations, 2021). In recent years, technological advancements have brought about significant global developments (Yachna et al., 2022). These innovations have effectively diminished the distance barrier, enabling new channels for connecting people across the world (Yachna et al., 2022). Social networking platforms such as Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, and others are accessed daily or even hourly by more than 66.66% of internet users, serving as key tools for communication and social interaction (Yachna et al., 2022). While the term "media" refers to tools or channels of communication (such as the internet), "social" pertains to interactions and engagement among individuals. However, the effects of social media on youth may vary depending on what they are exposed to online, their strengths or vulnerabilities, and the social environments in which they are raised (Prinstein, Nesi & Telzer, 2020). Researchers have found that, similar to the internet at large, social media platforms often reflect the racial biases of those who design them. For instance, algorithms and mathematical formulas that shape users' online experiences can inadvertently encode systemic racism rooted in historical discrimination (Noble, 2018). Consequently, social media may act as a breeding ground for harmful ideologies, fostering communities that promote racist hate (Relia et al., 2019). This influence can extend beyond digital spaces, contributing to real-world violence and negatively impacting individuals' wellbeing (Tynes et al., 2019).

Mental health involves emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. In the youth context, mental health influences how they manage stress, interact with peers, and make life decisions. In South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape, mental health issues among youth are worsened by socioeconomic pressures, family dynamics, cyberbullying, and digital influences. The role of social media in shaping these outcomes permits close examination, particularly as youth in areas such as Mthatha may face unique challenges compared to developed regions in the country. The interplay between social media and youth mental health is a growing area of concern. Social media platforms, integral to the daily lives of young people, can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on mental health. For instance, while social media can offer social support and a sense of community, excessive use and exposure to idealised content can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and negative body image (Primack et al., 2022). This research aims to explore these dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of how social media influences mental health among youth.

2. Problem statement

Recent research has emphasised the positive and negative consequences of social media usage. Nevertheless, the correlation between the use of social media and the mental health outcomes of young people is still ambiguous and intricate. Primack et al. (2022) proposed a substantial correlation between adolescents' increases in anxiety and depression symptoms and their high social media usage. However, Best, Manktelow and Taylor (2020) identified positive aspects, including improved social support and community development, that may mitigate some of the negative effects. The evaluation of the effects of social media platforms is further complicated by their rapid evolution. There has been a recent surge in the number of parents, advocates, and policymakers who have voiced their apprehensions regarding the potential adverse effects of social media usage. According to Orben and Przybylski (2020), several studies have suggested that social media use may be associated with detrimental mental health outcomes, such as loneliness, suicidality, and diminished empathy. The impact of social media on mental health has been the subject of varied research results from individual studies. Even though a significant portion of the public narrative regarding the effects of social media implies that mere exposure is associated with mental health issues, the most reliable evidence indicates that the quality of use is more important than the quantity (Untari et al., 2020). For example, research suggests that depression is precipitated by the use of social media for negative social comparison, which, in conjunction with rumination, contributes to the condition (Nesi, 2020).

3. Literature review

3.1. Social media influence young people's mental health outcomes

Social media are digital platforms that enable the exchange and creation of user-generated content, facilitating communication and interaction within virtual communities. Social media has both positive and negative effects on the mental health of youth worldwide. Positive outcomes encompassed enhanced communication, reading, networking, and learning abilities. Negative consequences may encompass anxiety, melancholy, low self-esteem, and other conditions. Mental health benefits of adolescent social media usage. Some adolescents may benefit from social media by establishing a positive community and establishing connections with others who share their identities, abilities, and interests. It can provide access to critical information and establish a platform for self-expression (Uhls, Ellison, & Subrahmanyam, 2020; Gulevičiūtė et al., 2025).

Abi-Jaoude, Naylor and Pignatiello (2020) have identified among the advantages of social media use for adolescents the capacity to establish and sustain friendships online and establish social connections. These relationships can offer an opportunity for positive interactions with a wider range of peer groups than are available offline, as well as provide significant social support to youth (Orben & Przybylski, 2020). Youth who are frequently marginalised, such as racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, may find the stress-reducing benefits of online social support from peers particularly significant (Twenge et al., 2022). Social media has been demonstrated to facilitate peer connection, identity development and management, and social support, which may contribute to the mental health and wellbeing of youth who identify as lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or other (Orben & Przybylski, 2020). According to Uhls, Ellison, and Subrahmanyam, seven out of ten adolescent females reported encountering positive or identity-affirming content related to race across social media platforms. Most adolescents reported that social media has facilitated their sense of acceptance (58%), a sense of support during difficult times (67%), a platform to express their creativity (71%), and a greater sense of connection to the lives of their peers (80%).

3.2. Negative consequences of adolescent social media usage on their mental health

Research has shown that suicide- and self-harm-related content and risk-taking challenges on social media platforms are associated with childhood fatalities (Gelles-Watnick, 2022). For children and adolescents who are already grappling with mental health challenges, this content may pose an enhanced risk (Dyer, 2022). A systematic review of over two dozen studies found that certain social media platforms display live depictions of self-harm, including partial asphyxiation, seizures, and cutting, which result in significant haemorrhaging (Carville, 2022). Despite the fact that social media provides a sense of community for some, this has negative consequences (Carville, 2022). In addition, these studies discovered that the discussion or display of this content can normalise certain behaviours, such as the posting of self-harm models for others to follow and the formation of suicide pacts (Sumner et al., 2021).

Additionally, social media, particularly among adolescents, may perpetuate low self-esteem, disordered dietary behaviours, social comparisons, and body dissatisfaction. A synthesis of 20 studies by Thai et al. (2023) has shown a substantial correlation between social media use and body image concerns and eating disorders, with social comparison as a potential contributing factor. Social media-generated social comparison links disordered diet, body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms. Kleemans et al. (2018) discovered that nearly half (46%) of adolescents aged 13–17 reported that social media exacerbated their negative body image, 40% reported that it did not affect their feelings, and only 14% reported that it actually improved their mood. According to Bickham, Hunt, Bediou, and Rich (2022), approximately two-thirds (64%) of adolescents are “often” or “sometimes” exposed to hate-based content. One-third or more of adolescent females of colour reported exposure to racist content or language on social media platforms.

3.3. Anxiety and depression

Research has demonstrated a robust correlation between excessive social media use and an elevated risk of depression and anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Kleemans et al., 2018). Furthermore, the authors further stated that approximately 10% of university and college students have been subjected to cyberbullying on social media platforms, including offensive comments, unfounded rumours, and other forms of harassment. According to Bickham et al. (2022), negative remarks on social media platforms, including Twitter (X), frequently lead to mental distress among young people, including anxiety and depression.

3.4. Self-esteem

Dyer's (2022) research suggested that cyberbullying and negative social comparisons can result in decreased self-esteem as a result of social media use. It was discovered by Thai et al. (2023) that social media frequently encourages upward social comparison, in which individuals compare themselves to others whom they perceive to be more fortunate, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem. In addition, the emotional distress and feelings of worthlessness that cyberbullying on social media platforms can induce can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of young people (Gelles-Watnick, 2022).

3.5. Link between mental health and social media usage among young people

According to research, social media has become an indispensable component of the lives of students, substantially impacting their mental health (Bashir & Ahmad, 2017). In one respect, social media offers students the opportunity to establish connections with their peers, participate in social interactions, and access support networks, which can contribute to their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging (Lenhart et al., 2022). Youth can utilise this virtual connectivity to express themselves and interact with communities that share their interests or experiences, thereby alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness. Social media can be a valuable instrument for academic support, providing resources and forums that allow students to collaborate and seek assistance with their studies (Beyens, Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Nevertheless, there are potential negative consequences to the correlation between social media and the mental health of students. Consistent exposure to curated, idealised depictions of peers' lives can result in feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem, and inadequacy (Elha et al., 2019). The tension and depression that can result from the fear of missing out (FOMO) on social events or trends, and the pressure to maintain a perfect online image. Additionally, the mental health of students may be negatively impacted by the disruption of sleep patterns, the reduction of in-person interactions, and the increased likelihood of cyberbullying, all of which can be the result of excessive social media use (Swar & Hameed, 2020). It is imperative to promote a healthier online environment by balancing the positive and negative effects of social media (Elha et al., 2019).

3.6. Coping strategies to address the mental health consequences of social media

Based on the results of the study, it appears that there are few recommendations for the wellbeing of an individual (Bashir & Ahmad, 2017). The family is the most important and primary source of socialisation. Therefore, parents should establish a communication bridge between themselves and their offspring. Adolescence is a period of resistance, wrath, confusion, and emotions. Consequently, it is important to avoid the use of intimidation and instead employ the method of persuasion to provide children with guidance on internet usage (Swar & Hameed, 2020). There is an extensive increase in cybercrime. As a result, it is recommended that adolescents be informed of their legal rights through seminars and workshops conducted at the school level. In addition, it is recommended that children notify their parents of any threats or extortion they may encounter from an individual on the internet. To reduce the amount of time spent on irrelevant activities and conversing, it is also advised that adolescents receive frequent counselling at schools and colleges to improve their social media usage (Lenhart et al., 2022). Youth should be encouraged to engage with social media features that foster social support, online companionship, and emotional intimacy, all of which can contribute to healthy social development (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021; Psihogios et al., 2022; Holtz & Kanthawala, 2022; Charmaraman et al., 2022). Research

indicates that this type of online interaction may support youths' psychological growth, especially during times of social isolation, heightened stress, or when seeking connections with peers who share similar developmental or health-related experiences. This is particularly valuable for adolescents who face adversity or experience social isolation in their offline lives (Charmaraman et al., 2022; Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021; Psihogios et al., 2022; Holtz & Kanthawala, 2022).

Youth with mental health challenges such as social anxiety, depression, or feelings of loneliness may benefit from social media interactions that offer greater control, opportunities to rehearse social exchanges, and the ability to reflect on them (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016). However, these same individuals may also be more vulnerable to the negative aspects of social media use (Nesi, Mann & Robb, 2023). Social media presents a powerful avenue for the socialisation of specific attitudes and behaviors, often influencing adolescents to adopt their peers' opinions and prosocial behaviors (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021). Online discussions about healthy habits can encourage positive offline behavior and contribute to better overall wellbeing. Social media may be especially beneficial for those experiencing mental health crises or for members of marginalised communities who have often faced harm in digital spaces (Massing-Schaffer et al., 2022). For example, LGBTQIA+ and questioning adolescents can use social media to find peer support and exchange accurate health information, which promotes psychological development and offers protection against negative mental health outcomes during stressful periods (Craig et al., 2021). This support is vital when teens are unable or unwilling to discuss sensitive topics with parents or caregivers (Craig et al., 2021).

4. Theoretical framework

4.1. The Theory of Social Comparison

Initially proposed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 (McIntyre & Eisenstadt, 2011), Social Comparison Theory is based on the premise that individuals are motivated to obtain accurate self-evaluations. The theory elucidates how individuals assess their opinions and abilities by comparison to others in order to reduce uncertainty in these domains and learn how to define the self. Comparing oneself to others socially is a method of self-assessment and measurement that seeks to determine an individual's position in relation to their own set of standards and sentiments (Buunk, 2006). Social media's psychological implications can be comprehended through numerous psychological theories. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) claims that individuals establish their own social and personal value by comparing themselves to others. Social media enhances this effect by offering a continuous stream of peers' curated life highlights.

4.2. A Theory of Self-Discrepancy

According to the self-discrepancy theory, individuals evaluate their "actual" selves in relation to internalised standards or the "ideal/ought self." Emotional discomforts (e.g., anxiety, threat, restlessness) are associated with inconsistencies between the "actual," "ideal," and "ought" versions of oneself, which are characterised by idealised versions of oneself that are derived from life experiences. The theory offers a framework for comprehending the way in which various categories of discrepancies between self-representations are associated with distinctive emotional vulnerabilities. The objective of Higgins was to demonstrate that emotional and psychological distress is the result of internal disagreement. Self-discrepancy is the phenomenon of negative emotions resulting from the discrepancy between two of these self-representations. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) posits that the gap between one's actual self and ideal self, which is frequently emphasised on social media, can lead to emotional distress and diminished self-esteem.

5. Research methodology

Qualitative research findings were employed in this review to investigate the influence of social media usage on the mental health of adolescents in the Eastern Cape. This systematic review used a multifaceted search strategy that encompassed peer-reviewed journals and reports from the previous decade. Utilising search terms such as "social media," "mental health," and "youth," relevant studies were identified through the utilisation of databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, Elsevier, Scopus, and Science Direct. Researchers limited the database searches to studies published in English, had abstract relevance, were free to access, were in the region, and were the most cited within the past four years. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses framework served as the basis for the study selection procedure (PRISMA, 2020). The qualitative studies that investigated the mental health consequences of social media use among young people aged 15-24 were included in the study. Studies that investigated the impact of societal norms on the mental health of adolescents and socioeconomic factors, or examined experiences in comparable rural settings, were also included. The selection of 57 studies for an in-depth analysis was made after they were screened for relevance and quality (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

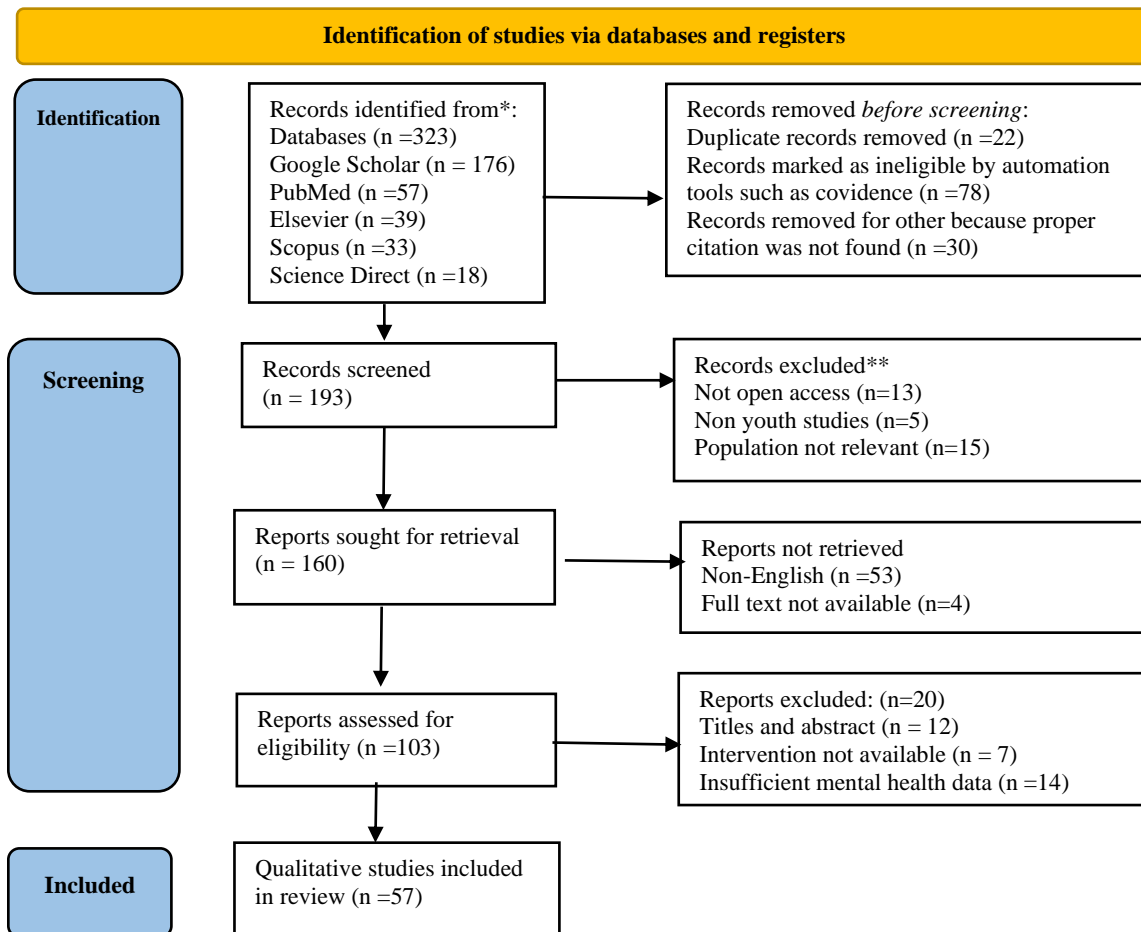


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram
Source: Prisma (2020)

Table 1. Databases and articles selection process

Database	Number of papers found	Number of papers selected
Google Scholar	176	25
PubMed	57	11
Elsevier	39	17
Scopus	33	2
ScienceDirect	18	2
Total	323	57

Source: authors

6. Findings and discussion

Anxiety, depression and social comparison

A recurring theme across studies is the role of social media in triggering anxiety through social comparison. Youth reported feeling inadequate after viewing idealised portrayals of success, beauty, and lifestyle on platforms like Instagram. This negative self-perception is often compounded by cyberbullying, which increases anxiety. In Mthatha, where socioeconomic disparities are pronounced, youth may experience heightened stress when comparing their lives to those of more affluent peers or influencers. Qualitative studies suggest that this comparison often leads to rumination, further deepening the feelings of worthlessness and anxiety. Youths described feelings of isolation despite being constantly connected online. The paradox of digital connection, yet emotional disconnection, has been a significant finding in several studies. As youth in Mthatha rely on social media for companionship, they often feel more disconnected from real-life relationships. Depression is also linked to excessive screen time, which leads to disrupted sleep patterns and diminished face-to-face interaction. Participants shared narratives about how their emotional wellbeing deteriorated due to pressure to keep up with online trends, leading to social withdrawal and loneliness. These findings are further supported by studies indicating a strong link between excessive social media use and increased risk of depression and anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Kleemans et al., 2018). The same authors further indicated that about 10% of university and college youth have been bullied on social media through offensive comments, untruthful rumours, and other forms of cyber-bullying. Bickham et al. (2022) indicated that youth often develop mental distress, such as depression and anxiety, resulting from negative comments on various social media platforms, such as X (Twitter).

Self-Esteem and Identity

Self-esteem, particularly among female youth, was found to be negatively affected by idealised images of beauty promoted on platforms such as Tik-Tok. Youths in Mthatha expressed concerns over body image, often feeling pressured to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. On the other hand, some studies have highlighted the positive role of social media in offering space for identity exploration. For LGBTQ+ youth, for example, social media provides an avenue to connect with supportive communities and express their identities freely. These findings concur with research by Dyer (2022), which indicates that social media usage can lead to lower self-esteem due to negative social comparisons and cyberbullying. Thai et al. (2023) found that social media often facilitates upward social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others who they perceive to be better off, leading to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem. Additionally, cyberbullying on social media platforms can have a detrimental effect on youth self-esteem, causing emotional distress and feelings of worthlessness (Gelles-Watnick, 2022).

The Role of Parents and Mental Health Professionals

The parents and mental health professionals identified in the studies noted the challenges in addressing social media-related mental health issues. Many parents felt disconnected from their children's online worlds, while therapists pointed to the need for more digital literacy among both the youth and adults. Interviews with parents in Mthatha revealed concerns about the addictive nature of social media, which often leaves youths vulnerable to mental health issues. These findings concur with the existing literature from various studies that have indicated a

strong link between excessive social media use and an increased risk for depression and anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Kleemans et al., 2018). The same authors further indicated that about 10% of university and college youth have been bullied on social media through offensive comments, untruthful rumours, and other forms of cyber-bullying. Bickham et al. (2022) indicated that youth often develop mental distress, such as depression and anxiety, resulting from negative comments on various social media platforms, such as X (Twitter).

Conclusions

The impact of social media on youth mental health varies with both risks and benefits. Anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues are common among youth exposed to social comparison and cyberbullying, and social media can also provide an approach for community building and identity exploration. Mental health interventions should consider the specific socioeconomic context of Mthatha, providing youths with digital literacy skills and promoting responsible social media use. This review paper highlights the importance of enforcing open dialogue between youth, parents, and mental health professionals to overcome the negative mental health impacts of social media.

Recommendations.

Mental health practitioners should work closely with parents to offer information that will help promote healthy social media usage;

Parents should talk more to their children to better comprehend the pressure that the youth feel as a result of the social media lifestyle;

Qualitative studies comparing the long-term effects of social media on youth in both rural and urban areas should be conducted;

Reinforcement of cyberbullying legislation to protect youth who use social media is recommended.

The study's *limitations* were the lack of articles written in English that investigated the mental health impacts of social media for review; furthermore, the study found articles that were not qualitative and not open to review. The last limitation is that studies that involved subject key informants, such as teachers and parents, who are presumed to know the youth better, were not easily found on the databases used by the authors.

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Sixolile NYUSANI

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5872-734X>

Anathi Beauty MABUNGELA

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6598-0295>

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