The Impact of Social Media on Student Mental Health: The Case of WhatsApp and Facebook

Liana Musekiwa

PhD, Tutor- TTC Mbuga, Rwanda

Abstract

The complex relationship between social media and student mental health was examined in this study. The results demonstrated both positive and negative effects. This study involved 50 students from colleges and universities in Zimbabwe, aged between 20 and 35. Social media analysis, interviews, and surveys were the methods used to collect data regarding the use of social media. The positive effects of social media act as a therapeutic method as it can give counselling, entertainment, connectivity, education, and personal empowerment. With the negative effects as cyberbullying, social media addiction, fear of missing out (FOMO) and bad effects on schooling and mental health. In conclusion, the impact of social media on students' mental health raises awareness of the potential negative psychological effects of excessive social media use on their well-being. This understanding could lead to the development of targeted interventions and programs to help mitigate these effects and these insights can also help shape policies and guidelines to protect youth's mental health in this digital era.

*Corresponding author: Liana Musekiwa, PhD, Tutor- TTC Mbuga, Rwanda.

Introduction

Individuals' lives in many societies worldwide are mostly impacted by social media [1]. Social media serves multiple purposes, which include communication, education, counselling, entertainment, and/or occupation [2]. Nevertheless, with the increase in social media use, individuals have been impacted in various ways, including financial, behavioral, and mental health [3]. Facebook and WhatsApp have attracted over 2,4 billion active users in less than a few years. In the same period, an alarming increase in mental health problems has been noted, particularly in the young generation [4].

The current study aimed to look at the impact of social media on students' mental health, with a focus

on Facebook and WhatsApp. It focused on depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem in a certain generation, which is individuals born between the years of 1990 and 2005. Based on prior literature, it is believed that this generation will report more negative mental health because they grew up in the prime of social media and the internet [5].

Background

In recent years, social media platforms have become a big part of everyone's life. Increasing numbers of people use different social media platforms every day. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter are used to communicate, do business, keep up with the news, share experiences, and generally stay in touch with the world. They also provide a platform for negative behaviors like cyberbullying and life experiences that have been linked to depression and feelings of low self-worth [4].

Research Objective

To examine the role of social media in shaping students' emotional well-being, both positively and negatively.

Research Question

How does the use of WhatsApp and Facebook affect the mental health of students?

Literature Review

Social media is an online platform that people use to build social networks or social relations with other people who share similar personal or career interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections [2]. Research by Sharma, John & Sahu explored the link between social media and factors such as social connectedness, friendship quality, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships [6]. There is a gap regarding social media and student mental health issues.

Facebook and WhatsApp are used extensively over the globe for a variety of purposes, and in recent years, social media usage has significantly increased among teenagers. Many people believe that their day is lacking if they don't scroll past their social media accounts because it has also become a vital activity for grown-ups that has made communication simpler and convenient [7]. Additionally, social media makes it simple to share images, communicate via messages and other forms of data, express ideas, and see movies from around the globe. In 2023, an estimated 4.9 billion people use social media across the world. With 4.9 billion users worldwide, social media usage has reached a new high level, especially among students. Youth have had a significant impact from social media in both positive and negative ways. It's critical to understand that the consequences might vary greatly according to usage habits, age, and other factors. The most common negative impact of social media is its excessive usage among individuals aged between 10 and 35 years of age, including both males and females.

Facebook is one of the social media platforms that the current study included in the data collection. This platform was established in February of 2004 by founder Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook was one of the first platforms in the ongoing era of social media. Many individuals today use it, including individuals from all generations. Since Facebook is one of the first platforms to gain popularity, there has been research on its impact on depression, anxiety, and psychological well-being Over three billion people are currently active users of Facebook, the largest social networking website, and it is anticipated that this number will grow significantly over time, especially in developing countries [2]. Facebook is used for both personal and professional interaction, and its deployment has had some positive effects on connectivity, idea sharing, and online learning [8].

WhatsApp has over 2,95 billion users and will soon reach 3,4 billion. It offers a powerful and convenient platform for communication, bridging distances and enhancing connectivity. It was established in February 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum. Although it has some disadvantages, many can be managed through mindful use and privacy settings. WhatsApp's numerous advantages make it an invaluable tool, but understanding its limitations can help users make the most of its features while ensuring their data and privacy remain secure.

Discussed social media and mental health, its benefits, risks, and opportunities among people [9]. It is known that social media has become an essential phenomenon in many people's lives, and so they are suffering from mental disorders.

Impacts of Social Media on Student Mental Health

The impacts of social media on students' mental health have been divided into two classes, which are positive and negative.

Positive Impacts

It is essential to note that social media can positively affect student mental health. It allows students to connect with family, friends, and peers. Social media simplifies our communication with friends and family regardless of location; it provides access to scattered information in one place and also promotes new connections [10]. This helps especially during physical separation, such as going away to college, leaving for respective universities. For instance, it can provide a sense of connection, especially for students who may be isolated or have difficulty forming social relationships. These days, not everyone uses social media as a platform to connect with friends or lovers, however, many specialists give advice, counselling, and inspiration to the needy human beings through their teachings.

In the case of intellectual health, people that be afflicted by a few mental health troubles, including anxiety and depression, some find it hard to share their problems with others around them [1]. In such cases, social media plays a supportive role to connect such persons seeking help from unique fitness professionals or others with similar experiences, thus they can get counselling or consolation. For instance, friends are a social platform managed by the intellectual fitness charity (Mind), which offers urgent help for intellectual issues. Brailovskaia pointed out that there are also numerous community pages or companies on Facebook run by mental fitness experts to assist with intellectual fitness problems and to increase focus [8]. Students get counselling, problems are shared, listened and people are given help through social media platforms.

Social media provides several advantages and possibilities to empower humans in many different ways. It plays the function of a writer, curator, and spectator. In greater detail, through social media, a person can create their profile displaying their exceptional first-rate skills, share the profile with billions of audiences from around the world and seek the proper oppor-tunity [3]. Social media is a place of understanding from which human beings can research the talents they are interested in, read and comply with the inspiring stories of successful character, get influenced, and develop as assured individuals [11]. It is accessible to all and sundry around the world, hence one's profile can be seen by everyone, giving opportunities to students and job seekers. Through social media, terrible practices are shared, people can express themselves, and even show their creativity [5]. It has emerged as a place to shout out. Social media can serve as a creative outlet for students to express themselves through art, music, writing, and videos. Hence promotion of positive mental well-being and self-esteem.

Negative Impacts

Some of the influences of social media on student intellectual health include cyberbullying, social media addiction, comparison, Fear of missing out (FOMO), and sleep destruction [12]. Cyberbullying is a significant issue, with many students experiencing online harassment, bullying, negative comments, and or exclusion. This can have severe consequences for their mental health, including stress, anxiety, and depression. Online bullying can cause feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, suicidal threats, anxiety, and melancholy [13]. Some may end up committing suicide or having suicidal thoughts, which can affect them or lead to drug and substance abuse, resulting in stress and or mental challenges.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is another reason students and some people use social media nowadays. Students might have the pressure to feel that they want to attend and know every event taking place, and this leads to inadequate sleep or sleepless nights, which can cause stress and a decline in mental health. The disrupted sleep patterns can lead to fatigue, decreased concentration, and poor academic performance [12]. Checking messages regularly, even when there aren't any messages, and keeping an eye on the notification bar all the time are the signs and symptoms of FOMO. People tend to give more time to the alert messages and not concentrate on other things like education or business.

Addiction is another problem of social media, as it has become part of our lives in the present era. Students fail to manage their time, thus impacting aca

demic performance and overall well-being [11]. The platforms of social media are convenient and easy to use as they provide verbal exchange to its certain degree, hence students cannot live without them. Social media is used excessively in all societies, henceforth becoming very serious with sex tapes, nude pictures [14]. On the issue of nude pictures and pornography, many students are rushing into doing sex and early marriages, and dropping out of school. If one is not addicted to social media, then there is no need to quit it. The addition of social media is harmful to mental health as it leads to many things like cyberbullying, stress, anxiety, distraction, and more. Users need to be very careful and use it until they benefit from it [15]. Furthermore, studies have discovered that certain sports in social media, such as texting and getting a response, getting likes, notifications, and nice feedback, could be interesting and one becomes addicted. Such addiction has an instant effect on mental health, which leads to low self-esteem, feelings of envy, anxiety, sleeping sickness, and in the worst situation, they commit against the law.

Depression is a common mental disorder that causes individuals to experience changes in mood, loss of interest or enjoyment, feelings of guilt or low self-esteem, disturbed sleep or urge for food, low power, and negative attention [16]. Likewise, anxiety is a sort of worry normally associated with the notion of a threat or something going incorrect in the future; however, it can also arise from something going on right now [16]. The relationship among depression, tension, stress and occasional vanity is interrelated as they can appear at any time, everywhere and from something. Immoderate use of social media is observed to be a critical driver of depression, anxiety and tension. A survey carried out by Woods showed that common social media use, nighttime precise use and emotional funding all had a significant impact on best of sleep quality, connected with a better degree of depression and anxiety [14]. The reasons for misery and anxiety amongst people are numerous, depending on the beliefs of human beings about the use of social media.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, allowing the researcher to explore students' personal experiences and perspectives in depth. Since it is grounded on an interpretivism paradigm, qualitative methods were employed to gain meaningful insights into the impact of social media on student mental health. Qualitative research deals with how the phenomena of interest are interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted [17]. Qualitative research is based on research methods that are flexible and sensitive to social context as interviews, observations, and focus group discussions, which were employed in the study. The methods take account of complexity, detail, and context and are good at answering the 'How' and 'What' questions in research, which are the major questions of this research [11]. Interviews and group discussions were held virtually via WhatsApp and Facebook chats, ensuring accessibility and participant engagement. Additionally, the researcher examined posts, messages, and discussions within student groups to identify recurring themes related to stress, anxiety, and emotional support. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of students' interactions on social media and their emotional well-being, providing rich qualitative data for analysis.

Findings and Discussions

The study's findings provide insights into how WhatsApp and Facebook influence students' mental health. The discussion highlights key themes identified through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis.

The study revealed that social media platforms play both supportive and detrimental roles in student mental health.

Positive Impacts

Students use WhatsApp and Facebook groups for peer support, sharing challenges, educational purposes and seeking advice. This has been seen by their responses in interviews and focus group discussions. This is evidenced in the following selected excerpts:

Emotional/ Peer Support

I was having a challenge and had no one close to tell, so I decided to share with a friend on WhatsApp. She then advised me on what to do, which helped me a lot as I was emotionally reassured in real-time. (Participant 1)

If you tell a close friend or relative some sensitive is

sues, you will hear them coming out or you will be a laughing stock, unlike putting it on Facebook with anonymity, you get help from different people without identifying yourself. (Participant 2)

I used to have the mind that WhatsApp and Facebook are not good until one day, when I was stressed with some issues that had happened and I posted on Facebook. The help that I got motivated me and gave me encouragement that boosted my morale. (Participant 7)

On Facebook, one can express their feelings without any fear of judgment because there are many people and they don't know who is posting what. (Participant 8)

Unlike traditional support systems that may require formal appointments (like therapy or counseling), WhatsApp and Facebook allow for instant communication and solutions and I have seen that as good for me. This means one can get or receive quick responses when feeling overwhelmed. (FG participant)

Social media has become an essential part of our lives. It is most convenient and easy to use. Social media simplifies our communication with friends and family regardless of location; it provides access to scattered information in one place and also promotes new connections. If you are not addicted to social media, then there is no need to quit social media. (FG participant)

The above responses clearly showed that students get emotional support from using WhatsApp and Facebook. WhatsApp and Facebook have become valuable platforms for connecting students to mental health resources, offering guidance, support, and awareness on emotional well-being [12]. However, students must also be encouraged to seek professional mental health support when needed. Motivation and encouragement that come from each other will help in reducing anxiety and boosting one's confidence. Hossain added that social media gives counselling to those who might be having challenges, so it acts as a therapeutic way to resolve problems and cope with their situations [1]. Social media is acting as a powerful tool for promoting mental well-being when used constructively [14].

Another issue of communicating with relatives and friends was also mentioned as an advantage of using WhatsApp and Facebook. As many people move from one country to the other in search of greener pastures, those families use social media to communicate.

Educational Benefits
Educational benefits are among the positive impacts of social media, and this has been shown by the responses from different participants. The following excerpts are the evidence.

We can have discussions on different educational topics to help each other. I remember having some WhatsApp lectures during COVID-19, and it helped us. So, we use these platforms for educational purposes at times. (Participant 10)

These platforms serve as interactive learning environments where students can engage in knowledge-sharing and collective problem-solving. We learn a lot by sharing lecture notes, study materials, and assignments through these platforms. (FG participant)

Our lecturer put information on our WhatsApp group, like topics to discuss, PowerPoint presentations, and some communiques. Even if we are on our own, we can have discussions about exams, help each other with revisions.

From the above sentiments, it clearly shows the positive impacts of social media. As the participants clearly said, the advantages and benefits of using WhatsApp and Facebook. The platforms will provide people instant access to information as people ask questions and can receive immediate responses from peers on the platforms.

Learning is more efficient by using these platforms, as indicated by the respondents, who share ideas and discuss certain topics that others might have challenges with. Also, discussions during or in preparation for exams. Additionally, students stay updated on class schedules, deadlines, and academic events, as they are given using the platforms mentioned above. students share revision guides, video tutorials, and other useful resources in preparation for examinations.

Negative Impacts

Social media has negative impacts on the mental health of students, as it is clearly shown by the respondents. The effects are anxiety, cyberbullying and toxic interactions, suicidal thoughts, among others. This is evidenced in the following selected excerpts:

I was hurt when one commented on my Facebook about my situation that I had posted. I thought of suicide because I could not hold it. (Participant 5)

We do not communicate face-to-face; we use video or WhatsApp calls. Hence, during these calls, we are disrupted in our studies as we spend more time on either WhatsApp or Facebook.

I have noticed that I spend a lot of time on social media chatting with my friends rather than reading and this has affected my academic results. (participant 4)

The platforms have really affected me as I see my school and college mates doing well through the pictures they post. I feel like I am wasting my time by being alive. Most of them have prospered and they live a pretty life compared to mine.

I could not sleep until I read the comments on Facebook, and this has affected me even in my school work, as I am now addicted to the platform. I have tried to ignore this sometimes, but I have seen that I am psychologically affected.

It was discovered that addiction to social media is harmful to mental health. It leads to many things like cyberbullying, stress, anxiety, distraction, and lots more. Cyberbullying victimization is connected with poorer mental health outcomes in teenagers, including an increased risk of sadness and anxiety [15]. Users have to be very careful and should use it until they benefit from it [15]. The use of social media was also connected with more depressive symptoms and excessive reassurance-seeking, but also with greater popularity and perceived social support, as well as appearance comparisons and body image worries, especially among young people [5,18].

Children and adolescents' bedtime media device use was substantially related to inadequate sleep quantity, poor sleep quality, and excessive daytime drowsiness. Excessive engagement often contributes to stress and sleep disturbances, which can make them sleep during learning time [14]. Students are addicted to social media and cannot sleep until they open messages, even if there are no pop-up notifications, they feel they have to open WhatsApp or Facebook. They miss a lot if they sleep during learning time and it will affect their results when it's time for the examination. It has been noted that some students may even try to commit suicide when they get low marks in an examination, and all this might be coming from the overuse of social media.

Many students reported feeling inadequate after comparing themselves to others on social media [5]. They start to compare themselves with their schoolmates as they will be seeing their pictures on the platforms. This lowers someone's self-confidence as they see themselves as failures in life. This can also lead to suicidal thoughts.

Some participants experienced distress from negative comments or online conflicts.

Conclusion

This study examined how social media affects student mental health in Zimbabwe. The results showed that social media has both positive and negative impacts on students' mental health. Relationships are affected by social media, causing depression and anxiety, as others may start to compare themselves with others and are dissatisfied with their lives. These findings underscore the need for culturally tailored interventions to address the negative effects, considering diverse demographic needs. Recognizing these nuances can guide the development of interventions to promote digital well-being use of social media. The purpose of this study is to encourage the students to use social media platforms in a balanced way that benefits them. Using social media in a balanced manner fosters the well-being of a person. It is essential to alert the students about the possible positive and negative impacts of social media on their mental health.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations on the impact of social media on student mental health to strengthen protections to ensure greater safety for students interacting with all social media platforms. This can be

done by developing age-appropriate health and safety standards for technology platforms and high standards of data privacy. In addition, policies that limit access to some social media for students aim to minimize the risk of harm to them. There is also a need for engagement with international partners working to protect students against online harm to their health and safety.

There should be increased funding for future research on the benefits and harms of social media use, which helps in supporting the development, implementation, and evaluation of digital and media literacy curricula in schools, colleges, universities and within academic standards. It raises awareness on healthy social media usage. Future research should consider investigating the particular contexts around social media usage (i.e., when do different age groups use social media, and what do they use it for).

References

1. Hossain A, Munam AlM (2022) Factors influencing Facebook addiction among Varendra University students in the lockdown during the COVID-19 outbreak. Computers in Human Behavior Reports 6: 100181.

2. Clemmitt M (2013) Social media explosion. CQ Researcher 23: 81-104.

3. Lenhart A (2018) Social media fact sheet. from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/.

4. Hanna E, Ward LM, Seabrook RC, Jerald M, Reed L, et al. (2017) Contributions of social comparison and self-objectification in mediating associations between Facebook use and emergent adults' psychological well-being. Cyber psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking 20: 172-179.

5. Golbeck J (2023) Are You a Social Media Addict? Psychology Today,https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-online-secrets/201709/.

6. Sharma MK, John N, Sahu M (2020) Influence of social media on mental health: a systematic review. Current Opinion in Psychiatry 33: 467-475.

7. Victor AM (2017) The Psychological Impact of Media on Adolescents. IOSR Journal of Nursing and Health Science 6: 70-75

8. Brailovskaia J, Schillack H, Margraf J (2020) Tell me why you are using social media (SM)! Relationship between reasons for use of SM, SM flow, daily stress, depression, anxiety, and addictive SM use- An exploratory investigation of young adults in Germany. Computers in Human Behavior 113: 106511.

9. Naslund JA, Bondre A, Torous J, Aschbrenner KA (2020) Social Media and Mental Health: Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities for Research and Practice. Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science 5: 245-257.

10. Undiyaundeye F (2014) Impact of social media on children, adolescents and families. Global Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences 3: 1-4.

11. Miller FB (2018) The connection between adolescents' depression and social media is complicated https://www.Washingtonexaminer.Com/redalert-politics/the-connection-betweenyouth-despair-and-social-media-is-complex   8.

12. Bhat S, Bashir H (2018) Effects of Social Media on Mental Health: A Review. The International Journal of Indian Psychology 4: 125-131.

13. Moreno M, Strasburg V (2014) Social Networking and New Technologies: STARs' social networking and technologies. Elk Grove Village, Illinois: American Academy of Paediatrics 25.

14. Woods HC, Scott H (2020) Sleepy teens. Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Journal of Adolescence 51: 41-59.

15. Hasan W (2016) Why Is Social Media Addiction Bad for Mental Health? Social omics website: https://socialnomics.net/2016/01/08/why-is-social-media-addiction-bad-for-mental-health/.

16. Mental Health Foundation (2018) Anxiety https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/anxiety.

17. Creswell JD, Creswell JW (2018) Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. Los Angeles, Sage Publications Ltd https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf.

18. Mohammed RA (2023) Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health, Int. J. in Pharm. Sci 1: 95-107.

19. Jamal S, Rahman A (2022) Social Media and Mental Health of The Youth: A Review. International Journal of Indian Psychology 10: 1129-1135.