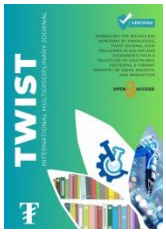
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Social Media Use among High School Youth in King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality

Usage Patterns and Educational Implications

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Abstract
This study examined the impact of social media use on the mental health of high school youth in King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) Local Municipality, South Africa. The study focuses on youth aged 18 years and explores the prevalence of social media usage, the platforms and features most frequently used, the relationship between social media engagement and mental health outcome. Particular attention is given to issues such as anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, sleep disturbances, cyberbullying, and fear of missing out, which have been linked to excessive social media use. In addition, the study investigates how parental monitoring and supervision influence young people's social media habits and mental well-being. The research is motivated by the increasing use of social media among adolescents and the growing evidence suggesting both positive and negative effects on mental health. Although social media can foster social connectedness and emotional support, excessive or inappropriate use may expose youth to harmful content and psychosocial risks. By examining these dynamics within high schools in KSD Municipality, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between social media use and youth mental health. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators, parents, mental health practitioners, and policymakers in developing interventions and strategies that promote responsible social media use and support positive mental health outcomes among youth.

Keywords
mental health, high school youth, social media usage, King Sabata Dalindyebo

INTRODUCTION

According to Smith & Anderson (2020), social media refers to digital platforms that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, enabling interaction and communication within virtual communities. Key platforms include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, which enable users to interact with others, share multimedia content, and participate in online communities. The same authors state that the pervasive nature of these platforms has transformed social interactions and information sharing, impacting various aspects of daily life. In South Africa, the definition of youth is typically based on the National Youth Policy (2015), which defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years. This definition is also supported by the South African government's Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities.

The prevalence of social media on personal devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers significantly heightens the risk of youth being exposed to online pornography (Ali et al., 2024). This risk is further amplified by insufficient parental monitoring of social media activities. Furthermore, unintentional exposure to such explicit content raises major questions about the internet's suitability for young users, even beyond purposeful viewing (Twenge et al., 2020). With users, especially youngsters, fully aware of how easily pornographic material can be obtained through

anonymous browsing and mobile devices that provide constant connectivity and privacy, the accessibility and availability of sexual content have reached previously unheard-of levels.

Social media holds significant importance in the lives of high school students by offering various advantages such as a sense of social support, facilitating the creation of online communities, enabling easy access to and sharing of information, enhancing feelings of acceptance, fostering creativity, increasing the frequency of communication, and helping to overcome social barriers (Caba Machado et al., 2024). These platforms serve as critical tools for connection, learning, and self-expression, contributing positively to adolescent development and social interactions.

They can also be beneficial in reducing isolation, improving social skills, and providing a platform for continuous communication and maintaining friendships when separated by physical distance (Foroughi et al., 2022). Furthermore, because youth with mental health issues are more susceptible to loneliness, mental health professionals acknowledge that social media's communicative and connective qualities might be especially helpful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The mental health impact of social media on high school youth has become a critical focus as these platforms increasingly dominate adolescents' everyday lives and social interactions. While social media facilitates connection, creativity, and information sharing, substantial evidence points to its complex and often detrimental impacts on the mental health of youth. Research links heavy or problematic use with heightened anxiety, depression, stress, lowered self-esteem, and disrupted sleep patterns (Ellis et al., 2024; Newport Academy, 2025). The nature of these platforms, which often emphasize validation and social comparison, can intensify experiences of cyberbullying and peer rejection key contributors to emotional distress (Ellis et al., 2024; Corrie et al., 2024). Adolescents themselves acknowledge that although social media offers support and social connectivity, it also exacerbates anxiety and harms real-world relationships and mental health (National Library of Medicine, 2022). Considering the pivotal developmental phase of high school youth, a nuanced understanding of social media's effects is essential for shaping effective interventions, parental guidance, and policies to safeguard this vulnerable group.

To investigate how social media use impacts mental health outcomes among high school students, this review synthesizes previous research, considering both potential protective factors and hazards.

Prevalence of social media platform usage among high school youth

According to Pew Research Centre (2025) survey of teens ages 13 to 17, 90% of teens say they use YouTube, 63% use TikTok, 61% use Instagram, and 55% use Snapchat. Over half of teenagers use YouTube (73%) and TikTok (57%) regularly; some say they use these sites almost constantly (15% for YouTube, 16% for TikTok). Usage of platforms like Facebook and Twitter has now sharply declined among this age group. There are some demographic variations: teen girls are more likely to use TikTok and Instagram, while boys use YouTube more; Black and Hispanic teens also show higher usage of TikTok and Instagram than White teens (Pew Research Centre, 2025).

Furthermore, Matenda et al. (2020) demonstrated in a South African study conducted in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, that social media is embedded in young people's everyday lives not only for entertainment but also for academic collaboration, information-seeking, and emotional support. These findings lend further support to the argument that moderate daily use represents adaptive rather than dysfunctional engagement within the South African high school context. While moderate use dominates, the present study also shows that a substantial minority engage in high-intensity social media usage, with 22% spending four to six hours daily and 13% exceeding six hours per day. South African literature increasingly conceptualises this group as occupying a high-risk digital engagement zone rather than constituting an anomaly.

Various social media platforms and their feature

According to Cropink (2025), social media platforms have become essential tools for communication, offering unique features that influence how individuals interact, share information, and build relationships. Facebook remains one of the most widely used platforms, enabling users to connect through messaging, content sharing, groups, and live streaming. While Facebook strengthens social connections and relationship maintenance (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), excessive passive use may contribute to loneliness and depression (Kross et al., 2013). Twitter is valued for its ability to rapidly distribute information and support social activism through hashtag movements such as #BlackLivesMatter (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Brock, 2015). However, it is also associated with cyberbullying, online harassment, and the spread of misinformation (Mehrotra et al., 2020; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Instagram focuses on visual content and uses personalized algorithms to increase user engagement through photos, videos, stories, and reels (Brocks, 2015).

YouTube, TikTok, and LinkedIn have further expanded the role of social media in modern society. YouTube has transformed content creation and media production by enabling users to create, share, and monetize video content while building large online audiences (Abidin, 2018). TikTok has gained global popularity through its short-video format and highly personalized recommendation system, making it a platform where entertainment, information, and education converge (Bannerflow, 2025; Rendón et al., 2022; Rein, 2023). Despite its popularity, concerns remain regarding content credibility and algorithm-driven information consumption (Grande, 2016; Caccuri, 2023). LinkedIn differs from other platforms by focusing on professional networking, career development, and employment opportunities. It allows users to showcase their skills, connect with professionals, and build their personal brands through content sharing (Culnan et al.,

2010). Overall, these platforms demonstrate the diverse ways social media shapes communication, learning, professional growth, and social engagement in the digital age.

Effects of Social Media

Social media has a complicated impact on youth's mental health; studies have shown both good and bad effects. Excessive or problematic social media use is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, body dissatisfaction, and sleep disturbances, especially among adolescent females, where an additional hour on social media correlates with a 13% rise in depression risk (Yue & Rich, 2023; Primack et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Negative effects often arise from passive use, social comparison, exposure to negative information, such as self-harm and cyberbullying, and misinformation, contributing to emotional distress and poorer mental health. Problematic social media use affects about 11% of adolescents, characterized by compulsive and uncontrolled use (WHO, 2024).

Nonetheless, social media also offers mental health benefits through social support, reduced isolation, and self-expression, particularly for marginalized youth (Ulvi et al., 2022; Primack et al., 2022). The impact depends largely on the quality and context of use and is influenced by individual and social factors. Researchers advocate for longitudinal studies and interventions focusing on digital literacy, supportive online environments, and parental/educational guidance to mitigate risks and enhance benefits (Yue & Rich, 2023; WHO, 2024).

Theoretical Framework: Social Comparison Theory

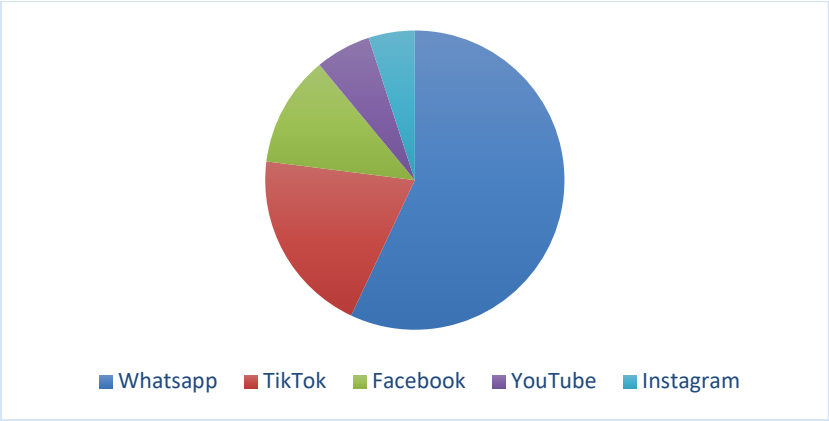
Social comparison theory, proposed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 (McIntyre, Kevin, Eisenstadt, & Donna, 2011). The key tenet of the theory is that people are driven to obtain accurate self-assessments. It suggests that to reduce confusion and gain a better understanding of themselves, people evaluate their own beliefs and skills by contrasting them with those of others. Engaging in social comparison serves to measure oneself and conduct self-assessment, helping individuals determine their standing based on personal standards and emotional responses (Buunk, 2006).

The researcher used Social Comparison Theory because it offers a framework for comprehending how social media use among high school students can have both positive and negative effects on mental health. High school students who engage in upward and downward comparisons can experience outcomes such as motivation, empowerment, a sense of belonging, and reinforcement among themselves. Individual factors, the kind of comparisons made among themselves, and the resources available to manage these effects all influence the impact of social media on rural residents' mental health.

RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that social media is deeply integrated into the lives of high school youth in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality. WhatsApp emerged as the most frequently used social media platform, accounting for 57% of respondents, followed by TikTok (20%), Facebook (12%), YouTube (6%), and Instagram (5%). This demonstrates a strong preference for instant messaging and short-form video content over traditional social networking platforms. In terms of daily usage, most of the respondents (46%) reported spending between one and three hours on social media each day, while 22% spent four to six hours and 13% spent more than six hours daily. This means that 35% of learners spend four or more hours on social media, highlighting a significant level of engagement among a considerable proportion of youth.

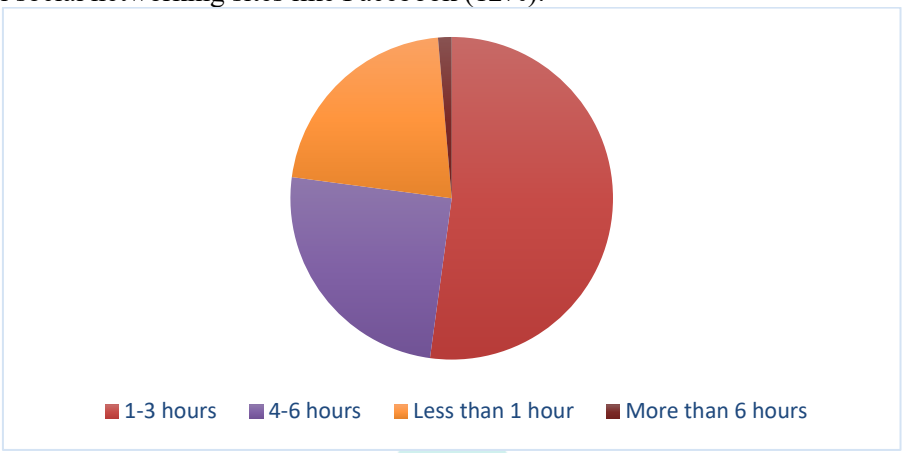
Furthermore, social media access was found to be overwhelmingly home-based, with 90% of respondents accessing platforms from home, compared to only 8% at school and 2% at internet cafés. This suggests that most learners have personal devices and internet connectivity, allowing social media to play a prominent role in their daily routines. Regarding the purpose of use, communication was the most commonly cited reason (38%), followed closely by education (31%), indicating that social media serves not only as a communication tool but also as an important educational resource. Entertainment accounted for 19% of usage, while news (8%), self-expression (3%), and business ideas (1%) were less common motivations. Collectively, these findings suggest that social media is a significant aspect of learners' social and academic lives, providing opportunities for communication, collaboration, and learning, while also raising concerns about the substantial amount of time some learners spend online and the potential implications for their academic performance and overall wellbeing.



- **WhatsApp:** 57%
- **TikTok:** 20%
- **Facebook:** 12%
- **YouTube:** 6%
- **Instagram:** 5%

Fig. 1 Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms

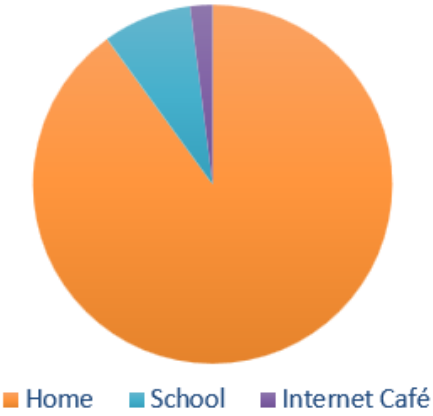
The findings reveal WhatsApp as the dominant platform, used by more than half of all respondents (57%). TikTok was the second most popular, used by 20%. This suggests a strong preference for instant messaging and short-form video content over traditional social networking sites like Facebook (12%).



- **1–3 hours:** 46%
- **4–6 hours:** 22%
- **Less than 1 hour:** 19%
- **More than 6 hours:** 13%

Fig. 2 Time Spent on Social Media Per Day

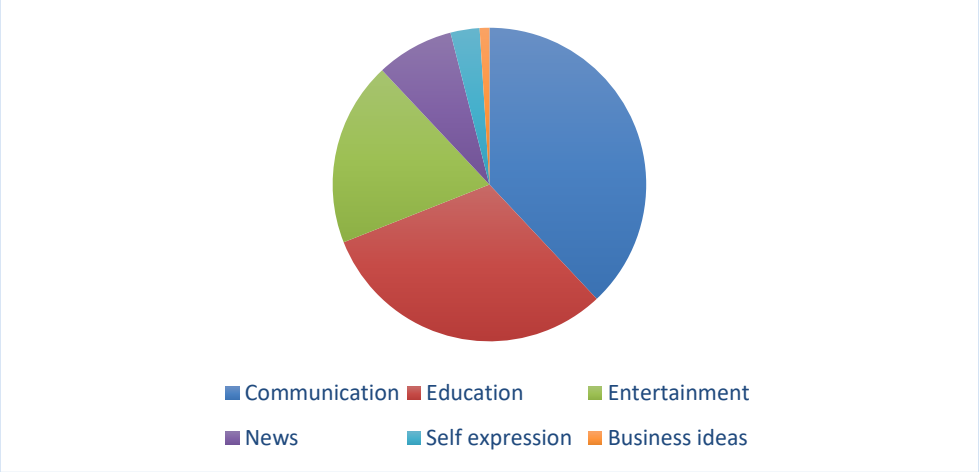
The most common daily usage was 1-3 hours (46%). However, a combined 35% of the youth reported spending four or more hours per day on social media, indicating a significant time investment from a substantial minority.



- **Home:** 90%
- **School:** 8%
- **Internet Café:** 2%

Fig. 3 Usual Place of Accessing Social Media

Access to social media is overwhelmingly home-based (90%). This suggests that most of the youth have personal devices and private internet access, integrating social media deeply into their home environment.



- **Communication:** 38%
- **Education:** 31%
- **Entertainment:** 19%
- **News:** 8%
- **Self-expression:** 3%
- **Business ideas:** 1%

Fig. 4 Main Purpose for Using Social Media

Communication was the most frequently cited primary purpose (38%), closely followed by education (31%). This is a significant finding, indicating that a large proportion of youth is actively using social media for learning-related activities. Entertainment, while still a major factor, was the primary purpose for only 19%.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media plays a central role in the lives of high school youth, particularly as a tool for communication, learning, and social interaction. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used platform among participants, followed by TikTok, while Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were used less frequently. The dominance of WhatsApp suggests that learners prefer instant messaging platforms that facilitate quick and direct communication with peers, family members, and teachers. Social media usage was found to be relatively high, with many participants spending several hours online each day, indicating that these platforms form an important part of their daily routines. Communication was identified as the primary purpose of social media use, closely followed by educational activities, highlighting the growing role of social media as a support tool for teaching, learning, information sharing, collaboration, and academic engagement. The findings further revealed that social media provides learners with access to educational resources, enhances technological literacy, promotes collaboration with classmates, and supports personal development. Many participants also reported positive experiences such as increased understanding, motivation, confidence, improved communication skills, happiness, and a greater sense of social connectedness through their online interactions.

Despite these benefits, the study also identified several challenges associated with social media use. While most respondents did not believe that social media negatively affected their self-esteem, study time, or mental health, a notable minority reported experiences of social comparison, depressive feelings, sleep disturbances caused by late-night usage, and reduced time available for studying. These findings suggest that the impact of social media varies according to individual usage patterns and personal circumstances. Although cyberbullying and online harassment were reported by only a small proportion of participants, their presence remains a concern due to the potential psychological consequences. Encouragingly, many respondents indicated that social media motivates them to improve themselves and work harder, while most also reported taking breaks from social media to protect their mental well-being. Friends were identified as the primary source of emotional support when social media negatively affected mood, followed by parents and teachers. Overall, the findings suggest that social media has a mixed but largely positive influence on high school learners, serving as an important platform for communication, education, motivation, and social support. However, balancing social media use and promoting responsible online behaviour remain essential to minimizing potential risks and maximizing its educational and psychosocial benefits.

Type of social media platforms used by participants

The findings of this study show that respondents make greater use of instant messaging and direct communication platforms than of content-sharing or image-focused applications. This trend suggests possible implications for how information is exchanged, how peers interact, and how academic communication takes place among the participants.

When asked about their most frequently used platforms, more than half of the respondents identified WhatsApp as their primary choice. TikTok followed, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were the least utilised platforms in the sample of 100 participants.

In just 3 years, online social media platforms have dramatically transformed the social context in which adolescents develop, with peer interactions now frequently mediated by technological devices. For example, in nationally representative samples of teens (ages 15–18), more adolescents report texting with friends daily (55%) than seeing them in person every day (25%) (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2024). Moreover, 46% report being online 'almost constantly' and 95% use some form of social media, including 63% using TikTok, 60% using Snapchat, and 59% using Instagram (Anderson, Faverio, & Gottfried, 2023). Notably, social media are diverse and thus difficult to define consistently. Widely accepted definitions conceptualize social media as computer-mediated, internet-based communication channels that allow for selective self-presentation and online social interaction with both broad and narrow audiences (Bayer, Trieu, & Ellison, 2020)

Prevalence of social media platform usage among high school youth

Social media use is common among participants, with many spending several hours online each day. This level of engagement suggests relatively high usage for a significant portion of the group, which may have implications for academic performance, sleep quality, mental health, and social relationships, depending on the study's focus

Bryan (2024) confirms that social media has become a popular medium for communication among early adolescents in recent years. The minimum age for most social media platforms (including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Reddit) is 13 years old in accordance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule of 1998. However, due to a lack of robust age verification, underage individuals often open and maintain social media accounts. One study found that 42% of children aged 9–12 had underage Facebook accounts in 2013–2014; however, other social media platforms have risen in popularity over the past decade (Barbovschi, Machackova & Olafsson, 2015).

Purpose of using social media

Participants' reactions to the purpose of using social media show that communication is the primary purpose, followed closely by educational and entertainment purposes, while smaller proportions use social media for news, self-expression, and business ideas.

Thomas, Orme and Kerrigan (2020). In today's world, students use social media extensively due to the greater accessibility of smartphones and the internet, which supports teaching and learning. This use of the internet, through social media, helps students meet their needs for exit exams, graduate admission tests, e-learning, research, project work, and day-to-day education. Moreover, students use the internet for social networking, entertainment, watching movies and news, checking email, playing online games, online shopping, maintaining relationships, and making new friends.

To achieve better academic outcomes, many students turn to social media for both academic and non-academic purposes (Ali & Dmour, 2021). Additionally, according to Aghaee (2010), 41% of students used social media for academic purposes, and 64% of students used it to interact with classmates during class activities. Furthermore, social media platforms give students the chance to interact with others in both academic and extracurricular settings; according to Chukwuere (2021), social media enhances academic performance and makes studying enjoyable and simple. Students now know enough about social media platforms to provide successful and efficient learning. Findings from this study confirm that social media enhances the quality of academic work and promotes greater student participation, collaboration, and engagement in academic activities.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the impact of social media use on the mental health of high school youth in King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality. According to the study, social media interacts with mental health in a multifaceted way, producing both beneficial and harmful effects. On the positive side, these platforms enhance connections, support academic engagement, and enable individuals to sustain friendships even across long distances. Social media also offers a space to express oneself and serves as a source of motivation for many users, contributing to personal growth, goal-setting, and academic or career ambitions. The high level of agreement reflects the constructive influence that social media can have when used for informational and inspirational purposes. Nevertheless, the harmful impact of social media on mental health is becoming increasingly obvious. Overuse of these platforms can result in compulsive behaviours, marked by constant checking of notifications and an ongoing fear of being left out, which intensifies unease and interferes with offline social engagement and healthy sleep habits. Therefore, despite the meaningful opportunities social media provides for expressing themselves and interaction, it remains essential to adopt careful and balanced use of these platforms to minimize harmful effects on mental health.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has three major limitations. It was limited to four high schools within King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The sample size of 100 participants may not fully represent the broader high school youth population. Finally, the study focused only on students aged 18 years and older,

excluding younger high school learners who are also active social media users. Future research should include participants from other municipalities, districts, provinces, and rural as well as urban areas across South Africa. This would allow researchers to compare findings across different contexts and improve the generalizability of results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given social media's dual nature, users must take a balanced approach that maximizes its benefits while mitigating potential risks. It is crucial to use social media properly, which includes setting screen time limits and selecting information that promotes personal well-being. Improving online literacy skills further enables individuals to evaluate the effects of their online behaviour more thoughtfully and to develop healthier, more sustainable patterns of interaction with social networking sites.

Future research should explore how social media affects different demographic groups and examines the long-term outcomes associated with changing patterns of use. In-depth analysis of technological solutions, including platform design attributes that encourage careful use or limit exposure to harmful content, can provide valuable insights to enhance users' online experiences. In addition, continued collaboration among technology developers to produce digital spaces that prioritize psychological health and protect users' overall welfare is crucial, as is the involvement of mental health professionals and politicians.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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