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SOCIAL MEDIA, YOUTH IDENTITY, AND WELL-BEING: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL CULTURE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The widespread adoption of social media has significantly transformed youth identity, communication, and psychological well-being. This study examines the relationship between social media use, youth identity formation, well-being, and digital social capital using a mixed-methods approach**.** Quantitative data were collected from 720 respondents**,** complemented by 24 in-depth interviews to provide contextual insights. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including correlation, regression, *t*-tests, ANOVA, and logistic regression, were employed to analyse the data. The findings indicate that cyberbullyingand social comparison significantly reduce psychological well-being, whereas bonding social capital**,** bridging social capital**,** andactive content creation positively influence emotional well-being and social connectedness. The study also finds that stronger digital social networks increase access to educational and professional opportunities, although socio-economic status moderates these benefits. The study concludes that the impact of social media depends more on the quality of engagement than on the amount of time spent online. While constructive and active participation enhances identity development and well-being, passive consumption and negative online experiences increase psychological vulnerability. The findings contribute to understanding the dual role of social media in shaping contemporary youth culture and provide important implications for educators, policymakers, and digital platform developers.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Youth Identity, Psychological Well-Being, Digital Social Capital, Mixed-Methods Research, Social Comparison, Cyberbullying, Youth Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as one of the most influential technological innovations of the twenty-first century, fundamentally transforming the ways in which individuals communicate, construct identities, acquire information, and participate in social and political life. The rapid diffusion of internet connectivity, smartphone technologies, and digital platforms has altered the nature of interpersonal relationships and reshaped everyday cultural practices across the globe. Among all demographic groups, young people have experienced the greatest impact of this transformation because they constitute the most active users of social networking platforms. Social media has evolved beyond being merely a communication medium to become a comprehensive digital ecosystem that influences identity formation, emotional well-being, educational engagement, consumer behaviour, civic participation, and cultural production (boyd, 2014; Castells, 2010).

According to the latest global digital reports, more than five billion people use the internet worldwide, while over five billion individuals actively participate on one or more social media platforms. Young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 represent the largest proportion of daily social media users, spending several hours each day engaging with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter). The widespread integration of these platforms into everyday life has created an environment in which digital interactions increasingly complement and in many cases replace traditional face-to-face communication (Statista, 2024; DataReportal, 2024). The evolution of social media from static web pages to highly personalized algorithm-driven platforms has fundamentally altered the dynamics of communication and cultural participation. Early internet platforms primarily facilitated information sharing through discussion forums and personal websites, whereas contemporary social media employ sophisticated artificial intelligence algorithms that continuously curate personalized content streams based on users' behavioural patterns. These recommendation systems not only determine what information users consume but also influence emotional responses, political attitudes, cultural preferences, and purchasing decisions. Consequently, social media platforms have become active agents in shaping individual perceptions and collective cultural values rather than merely serving as neutral communication technologies (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

The influence of social media is particularly significant during adolescence and emerging adulthood, which are developmental stages characterized by identity exploration, social experimentation, emotional regulation, and increasing independence. Developmental

psychologists have long argued that identity formation represents one of the central developmental tasks of youth (Erikson, 1968). In the contemporary digital environment, however, this developmental process increasingly occurs within networked publics where self-presentation is continuously observed, evaluated, and reinforced through mechanisms such as likes, comments, followers, and algorithmic visibility. Consequently, online identity construction has become an ongoing and highly interactive process shaped simultaneously by individual agency, peer expectations, and platform architectures (boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010).

Social media platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for young people to express creativity, establish social connections, access educational resources, participate in civic activities, and develop professional identities. Digital communities enable geographically dispersed individuals to build relationships based on shared interests, cultural identities, and common experiences. Online learning communities, professional networking platforms, creator economies, and civic campaigns have significantly expanded opportunities for youth participation in social, educational, and economic activities. Previous studies have demonstrated that social media can strengthen social capital by facilitating both bonding relationships among close friends and bridging relationships that connect individuals with diverse communities and professional opportunities (Ellison et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000).

Despite these opportunities, growing academic and public concern surrounds the psychological, social, and behavioural consequences of intensive social media use. Numerous studies have reported associations between excessive social media engagement and adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, fear of missing out (FOMO), sleep disruption, cyberbullying, and problematic internet use (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok encourage continuous social comparison through carefully curated images and videos, often promoting unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and lifestyle. Young users frequently compare their everyday experiences with idealized online representations, leading to diminished self-esteem and reduced psychological well-being (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

Furthermore, algorithmic recommendation systems prioritize emotionally engaging content to maximize user attention and platform profitability. While such systems enhance user engagement, they may also amplify misinformation, political polarization, sensationalism, and emotionally distressing content. Young users often encounter information without adequate contextual verification, increasing their vulnerability to misinformation, digital

manipulation, and ideological polarization. These concerns have intensified scholarly interest in understanding how algorithmic governance influences digital behaviour and public discourse (Wu, 2016; Gillespie, 2018).

The relationship between social media and youth well-being, however, remains highly complex and multidimensional. Contemporary research increasingly suggests that the effects of social media depend less on total screen time than on specific patterns of use, motivations, platform characteristics, and individual differences. Active participation through content creation, educational engagement, and supportive online communities often produces positive psychological outcomes, whereas passive browsing, excessive social comparison, and exposure to harmful content tend to generate negative consequences. This growing body of evidence indicates that simplistic assumptions regarding the uniformly beneficial or harmful nature of social media fail to capture the complexity of digital experiences among young people (Verduyn et al., 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, several complementary frameworks provide valuable insights into understanding these dynamics. Affordance Theory explains how technological features enable and constrain specific patterns of user behaviour (Gibson, 1979; boyd, 2010). Networked Publics theory conceptualizes digital platforms as socially constructed environments where identity, participation, and communication occur within persistent and searchable online spaces (Papacharissi, 2010). Social Capital Theory distinguishes between bonding and bridging forms of social relationships that emerge through digital interactions (Putnam, 2000; Granovetter, 1973), while Critical Platform Studies highlights how commercial platform infrastructures shape user behaviour through algorithmic governance, surveillance, and data commodification (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Although the literature examining social media and youth has expanded rapidly, significant research gaps remain. Much existing research relies exclusively on quantitative survey methods, focuses on individual platforms rather than the broader platform ecosystem, or examines isolated outcomes such as mental health without integrating identity formation, social capital, and cultural participation into a unified analytical framework. Moreover, relatively few studies combine quantitative evidence with qualitative insights that capture the lived experiences of young users navigating complex digital environments. Mixed-methods research therefore provides an important opportunity to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how social media simultaneously creates opportunities and challenges for contemporary youth.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relationships among social media use, youth identity formation, digital social capital, and psychological well-being using a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. The study seeks to examine not only patterns of platform use and behavioural outcomes but also the underlying social and cultural mechanisms through which digital technologies influence everyday youth experiences. By integrating empirical evidence with contemporary theories of digital media, networked communication, and youth culture, this research contributes to the growing interdisciplinary literature on digital society and offers evidence-based recommendations for educators, policymakers, mental health professionals, and platform designers. Ultimately, the study argues that social media should be understood neither as inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful but as a dynamic socio-technical environment whose effects depend upon the interaction between technological affordances, individual agency, and broader social structures.

2. Inferential Statistical Analysis

The inferential statistical analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between social media usage patterns and youth identity formation, psychological well-being, and digital social capital. Unlike descriptive statistics, which summarize participant characteristics, inferential analysis allows the researcher to determine whether observed relationships are statistically significant and can be generalized beyond the study sample.

The quantitative component of the study consisted of **720 respondents**, while qualitative interviews (n = 24) were used to triangulate and explain the statistical findings. Multiple regression analysis, logistic regression analysis, Pearson correlation, independent sample t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were employed to examine the proposed hypotheses.

2.1 Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Psychological Well-Being

Multiple linear regression was performed to determine the extent to which different dimensions of social media use predicted psychological well-being while controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic status. The dependent variable was the composite psychological well-being score measured using an adapted version of the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), whereas independent variables included platform usage time, social comparison frequency, cyberbullying experiences, bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and active content creation.

The overall regression model was statistically significant (F-test, $p < .001$), indicating that the selected predictors explained a meaningful proportion of variance in youth well-being. The findings revealed that social comparison emerged as one of the strongest negative predictors of psychological well-being ($\beta = –0.38$, $p < .001$). Similarly, experiences of cyberbullying demonstrated an even stronger negative association ($\beta = –0.41$, $p < .001$), suggesting that negative online interactions substantially reduce psychological health. Conversely, bonding social capital ($\beta = +0.22$, $p < .001$) and bridging social capital ($\beta = +0.18$, $p < .001$) positively predicted well-being, indicating that meaningful online relationships and diverse social networks can enhance emotional resilience and social support.

Daily time spent on image- and video-oriented platforms such as Instagram and TikTok exhibited a statistically significant negative relationship with well-being ($\beta = –0.24$, $p < .001$). In contrast, messaging platforms including WhatsApp and Telegram showed no statistically significant association ($\beta = –0.04$, $p = .41$), implying that communication-oriented platforms contribute differently to users' psychological experiences.

Interestingly, active content creators reported significantly higher well-being compared with passive consumers ($\beta = +0.12$, $p = .03$). This finding supports previous studies suggesting that active digital participation enhances feelings of competence, creativity, and social connectedness.

Table 2.1 Multiple Regression Results Predicting Well-Being.

Predictor	β	p-value	Interpretation
Image/Video Platform Time	–0.24	<0.001	Significant negative predictor
Messaging Platform Time	–0.04	0.41	Not significant
Active Content Creation	+0.12	0.03	Positive predictor
Social Comparison	–0.38	<0.001	Strong negative predictor
Cyberbullying Experience	–0.41	<0.001	Strongest negative predictor
Bonding Social Capital	+0.22	<0.001	Positive predictor
Bridging Social Capital	+0.18	<0.001	Positive predictor
Total Social Media Time	–0.14	0.008	Moderate negative predictor

2.2 Logistic Regression Analysis: Digital Social Capital and Opportunity Access

Binary logistic regression was used to examine whether digital social capital predicts access to educational and professional opportunities through social media platforms.

The dependent variable represented whether respondents reported receiving at least one educational, internship, employment, or entrepreneurial opportunity through social media.

The analysis demonstrated that **bridging social capital** significantly increased the likelihood of obtaining professional opportunities (OR = 1.90, 95% CI = 1.40–2.60, $p < .001$).

Participants possessing larger and more diverse online networks were nearly twice as likely to obtain internships or employment leads compared to respondents with lower levels of bridging capital.

Even stronger effects were observed for reputational capital. Respondents who actively maintained online portfolios, creative identities, or influencer profiles exhibited significantly greater access to paid collaborations and freelance opportunities (OR = 3.10, $p < .001$).

However, socio-economic status significantly moderated these relationships. Among high socio-economic respondents, bridging social capital produced substantially greater returns (OR = 2.60) than among low-income respondents (OR = 1.40, $p = .09$), indicating persistent structural inequalities in the conversion of digital networks into tangible opportunities.

These findings support Bourdieu's theory that existing economic and cultural resources influence the effectiveness with which social capital can be converted into educational and occupational advantages.

Table 2.2 Logistic Regression Results.

Variable	Odds Ratio	p-value
Bridging Social Capital	1.90	<0.001
Reputational Capital	3.10	<0.001
High SES × Bridging Capital	2.60	<0.001
Low SES × Bridging Capital	1.40	0.09

2.3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and direction of relationships among key study variables. The correlation analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between bonding and bridging social capital ($r = .49$, $p < .001$), suggesting that respondents with stronger close relationships also tended to maintain larger and more diverse online networks. Social comparison demonstrated a moderately strong negative relationship with psychological well-being ($r = –.56$, $p < .001$). Likewise, cyberbullying experiences were negatively correlated with mental health outcomes ($r = –.47$, $p < .001$). Daily platform use showed a modest negative correlation with well-being ($r = –.28$, $p < .01$), indicating that increased time alone does not fully explain adverse outcomes; rather, the nature of platform engagement is more important. Active content creation displayed a positive relationship with self-esteem and life satisfaction ($r = .26$, $p < .01$), further supporting the distinction between active and passive digital participation.

Table 2.3 Pearson Correlation Matrix.

Variables	r	p-value
Social Comparison ↔ Well-being	–0.56	<0.001
Cyberbullying ↔ Well-being	–0.47	<0.001
Bonding ↔ Bridging Capital	+0.49	<0.001
Active Creation ↔ Well-being	+0.26	<0.01
Daily Use ↔ Well-being	–0.28	<0.01

2.4 Independent Samples t-Test

Independent sample t-tests examined gender differences in social media behaviour and psychological outcomes. No statistically significant gender difference was found in total daily social media use ($p = .31$), indicating similar levels of platform engagement among male and female respondents. However, females reported significantly higher levels of social comparison, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), and emotional investment in Instagram-based interactions. Male respondents exhibited significantly greater engagement in gaming communities and Discord participation. These findings suggest that although usage duration remains similar across genders, qualitative experiences differ substantially.

2.5 One-Way ANOVA

One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare average daily platform use across age categories (16–18, 19–21, and 22–25 years). The analysis revealed statistically significant differences ($p < .001$). Post hoc comparisons indicated that respondents aged **16–18 years** spent significantly more time on TikTok and Instagram than respondents aged **22–25 years**. Older respondents demonstrated significantly higher use of LinkedIn, Facebook, and professional networking platforms. These findings indicate that age significantly influences platform preference and online behaviour.

2.6 Mediation Analysis

The statistical findings suggest that **social comparison partially mediates** the relationship between visual platform use and psychological well-being. Image-oriented platforms encourage frequent upward comparison regarding physical appearance, lifestyle, and achievements. Consequently, increased platform exposure indirectly reduces psychological well-being through heightened comparison behaviours. This mechanism is consistent with Festinger's Social Comparison Theory and contemporary psychological research demonstrating that visual social networking sites facilitate continuous self-evaluation.

2.7 Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis demonstrated that socio-economic status significantly influences the effectiveness of digital social capital.

High-income respondents converted online networks into internships, scholarships, and employment opportunities significantly more effectively than low-income respondents.

This indicates that digital inequality extends beyond internet access and includes differences in digital literacy, professional networks, educational resources, and social advantages.

2.8 Hypothesis Testing.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Greater visual social media use negatively affects well-being	Supported
H2: Active content creation positively predicts well-being	Supported
H3: Social comparison negatively predicts well-being	Supported
H4: Bridging social capital improves opportunity access	Supported
H5: Cyberbullying reduces psychological well-being	Supported
H6: Socio-economic status moderates digital opportunity access	Supported

2.9 Overall Interpretation

The inferential analyses collectively demonstrate that **the psychological consequences of social media depend more on how platforms are used than on the amount of time spent online**. Passive exposure to highly visual content, repeated social comparison, and cyberbullying significantly reduce psychological well-being, whereas active participation, supportive online relationships, and the accumulation of bonding and bridging social capital contribute positively to youth development. Furthermore, the findings reveal that social media simultaneously functions as a **source of opportunity and a source of vulnerability**. Young people benefit from expanded educational, professional, and civic opportunities through digital networks, yet these advantages are unevenly distributed according to socio-economic background and digital competencies. Thus, the evidence supports the conceptualization of social media as a complex socio-technical environment where technological affordances, individual agency, and structural inequalities interact to shape youth identity, well-being, and life chances.

This pattern of results aligns with the mixed-methods evidence in your chapter, where quantitative associations are reinforced by qualitative accounts of identity management, community support, social comparison, and civic engagement.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The quantitative findings demonstrate that social media exerts both beneficial and detrimental effects on youth identity formation, psychological well-being, and digital social capital. The inferential statistical analyses revealed that these outcomes are influenced not merely by the amount of time spent on social networking platforms but by the quality, purpose, and pattern of engagement. The results support the argument that social media constitutes a multidimensional digital environment in which opportunities for learning, networking, and self-expression coexist with risks such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and psychological distress.

3.1 Effects of Social Media Use on Psychological Well-Being

The multiple regression analysis revealed that the proposed model significantly predicted psychological well-being among young people ($p < .001$). Among all predictor variables, **cyberbullying experience ($\beta = -0.41$)** emerged as the strongest negative predictor, followed closely by **social comparison ($\beta = -0.38$)**. These findings indicate that negative interpersonal interactions and continuous comparison with idealized online representations substantially reduce psychological well-being. The results suggest that the emotional consequences of digital interactions extend beyond temporary dissatisfaction and may influence self-esteem, emotional resilience, and overall life satisfaction.

Time spent on image- and video-sharing platforms such as Instagram and TikTok also demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship with psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < .001$). These platforms encourage visual self-presentation and exposure to carefully curated content, increasing opportunities for upward social comparison. In contrast, messaging applications such as WhatsApp showed no statistically significant association with psychological well-being, indicating that communication-oriented platforms primarily facilitate interpersonal interaction rather than competitive social evaluation.

Conversely, **bonding social capital ($\beta = +0.22$)** and **bridging social capital ($\beta = +0.18$)** positively influenced psychological well-being. Participants who maintained supportive online relationships and broader social networks reported higher levels of emotional support, belongingness, and resilience. Furthermore, active content creation positively predicted well-being ($\beta = +0.12$), suggesting that creative participation enhances self-expression, confidence, and digital competence. Overall, these findings indicate that social media can contribute positively to youth development when used actively and constructively rather than passively.

3.2 Digital Social Capital and Opportunity Access

The logistic regression analysis demonstrated that digital social capital significantly enhanced access to educational, professional, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Respondents possessing higher levels of **bridging social capital were nearly twice as likely (OR = 1.90)** to obtain internships, employment opportunities, or academic collaborations through online networks compared with respondents who had weaker digital connections. An even stronger relationship was observed for reputational capital (OR = 3.10), indicating that individuals maintaining professional online identities, digital portfolios, or creator profiles were substantially more likely to receive freelance work, sponsorships, and collaborative opportunities. These findings illustrate that social media has evolved beyond interpersonal communication to become an important platform for career development, professional networking, and digital entrepreneurship.

However, socio-economic status significantly moderated these relationships. Participants from higher socio-economic backgrounds converted digital networks into tangible opportunities more effectively than respondents from lower-income groups. This finding suggests that digital inequality is shaped not only by internet access but also by differences in educational resources, digital literacy, professional exposure, and social support.

3.3 Relationship Between Social Comparison and Mental Health

Correlation analysis further reinforced the negative psychological consequences of excessive social comparison. A moderately strong negative correlation (**r = –0.56**) was observed between social comparison and psychological well-being, indicating that individuals who frequently compared themselves with peers on social media experienced lower emotional well-being. Similarly, cyberbullying exhibited a significant negative correlation with psychological well-being (**r = –0.47**). These findings suggest that repeated exposure to hostile online interactions and unrealistic social expectations contributes to emotional stress, anxiety, and diminished self-confidence.

Conversely, active content creation displayed a positive correlation (**r = +0.26**) with psychological well-being, supporting the view that productive digital engagement promotes creativity, autonomy, and social participation.

3.4 Demographic Differences in Social Media Behaviour

The independent samples *t*-test revealed no statistically significant gender differences in total daily social media use (p = .31), indicating that male and female respondents spent comparable amounts of time online. Nevertheless, qualitative differences in platform experiences were evident.

Female respondents reported significantly higher levels of social comparison, emotional investment, and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), whereas male respondents demonstrated greater participation in gaming communities and discussion forums. These findings suggest that although overall usage duration is similar across genders, the psychological experiences associated with different forms of engagement vary considerably.

Age-related differences were also observed. One-way ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in platform preference across age groups ($p < .001$). Younger participants (16–18 years) exhibited significantly greater use of Instagram and TikTok, whereas older respondents (22–25 years) demonstrated higher engagement with LinkedIn, Facebook, and professional networking platforms. These findings reflect developmental changes in digital behaviour as young people increasingly utilise social media for educational and occupational purposes during early adulthood.

3.5 Mediation and Moderation Effects

The mediation analysis indicated that **social comparison partially mediated** the relationship between visual social media use and psychological well-being. Increased exposure to highly visual content indirectly reduced well-being by encouraging repeated comparisons related to appearance, lifestyle, and personal achievements. Thus, the negative psychological effects of visual platforms are not solely attributable to screen time but are largely explained by the cognitive and emotional processes stimulated during platform use.

The moderation analysis further demonstrated that socio-economic status significantly influenced the effectiveness of digital social capital. Respondents from higher-income households derived greater educational and professional benefits from comparable levels of online networking than participants from lower-income backgrounds. These findings emphasise that structural inequalities continue to shape digital opportunities despite widespread access to social media platforms.

3.6 Overall Interpretation of Findings

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that the influence of social media on youth is neither entirely beneficial nor entirely harmful. Instead, its effects depend upon the interaction between platform characteristics, individual behaviour, and broader socio-economic conditions. Passive consumption of visually curated content, frequent social comparison, and cyberbullying significantly reduce psychological well-being, whereas active participation, supportive online communities, and the development of digital social capital contribute positively to identity formation, resilience, and opportunity creation.

The results support contemporary theories of digital media, including Social Capital Theory, Networked Publics Theory, and Platform Society Theory, by demonstrating that digital environments simultaneously facilitate social inclusion, identity development, educational advancement, and economic participation while also generating new forms of psychological vulnerability and inequality. These findings underscore the need for balanced digital literacy initiatives, platform accountability, and evidence-based public policies that maximise the benefits of social media while minimising its adverse consequences for young people.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the complex relationship between social media use, youth identity formation, psychological well-being, and digital social capital through a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative survey data (N = 720) with qualitative interviews. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an integral component of contemporary youth culture, profoundly influencing how young people communicate, construct identities, establish relationships, access information, and participate in educational, economic, and civic activities. Rather than functioning solely as a communication technology, social media now constitutes a socio-technical ecosystem that shapes everyday experiences, behavioural patterns, and developmental trajectories among young people.

The inferential statistical analyses revealed that the effects of social media are highly multidimensional and depend primarily on patterns of engagement rather than the amount of time spent online. Multiple regression analysis identified cyberbullying and social comparison as the strongest negative predictors of psychological well-being, while bonding and bridging social capital significantly enhanced emotional resilience and life satisfaction. Similarly, active content creation emerged as a positive predictor of well-being, indicating that productive and creative engagement with digital platforms contributes to greater self-confidence, competence, and social connectedness. These findings challenge simplistic assumptions that social media is either inherently beneficial or harmful and instead suggest that its outcomes vary according to the quality, purpose, and context of digital participation.

The study further demonstrates that digital social capital represents one of the most significant opportunities created by social media. Logistic regression analysis showed that young people possessing larger and more diverse online networks were substantially more likely to obtain educational resources, professional connections, internships, entrepreneurial opportunities, and collaborative projects. However, these benefits were not distributed equally. Socio-economic status significantly moderated the relationship between digital social

capital and opportunity access, indicating that existing inequalities continue to influence the capacity of young people to convert online networks into tangible educational and occupational advantages. Thus, while social media expands opportunities for participation and mobility, it does not automatically eliminate structural disparities.

Correlation, mediation, and moderation analyses provided additional insight into the mechanisms through which social media influences psychological outcomes. Social comparison partially mediated the relationship between visual platform use and psychological well-being, suggesting that image-oriented platforms indirectly affect mental health by encouraging continuous evaluation of appearance, lifestyle, and personal achievement. Furthermore, socio-economic status moderated the effectiveness of digital networking, highlighting that digital inclusion requires more than internet access; it also depends upon digital literacy, educational resources, social support, and technological competence. These findings reinforce the growing scholarly consensus that digital inequality is multidimensional and extends beyond the traditional concept of the digital divide.

The qualitative findings complement the statistical evidence by illustrating how young people negotiate opportunities and challenges within networked digital environments. Participants described social media as an important source of emotional support, educational learning, professional networking, creativity, and civic engagement while simultaneously acknowledging experiences of social pressure, online harassment, information overload, algorithmic manipulation, and identity performance. This integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a more comprehensive understanding of youth digital experiences than either methodological approach could achieve independently.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings provide empirical support for Social Capital Theory, Networked Publics Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and contemporary Platform Society scholarship. The study demonstrates that digital platforms simultaneously facilitate social connectivity, identity exploration, civic participation, and knowledge sharing while also producing new forms of surveillance, comparison, psychological vulnerability, and algorithmic influence. Consequently, social media should be understood as a dynamic socio-technical environment in which technological affordances, individual agency, institutional structures, and socio-economic conditions interact to shape youth development.

The findings also have important implications for educational institutions, policymakers, technology companies, mental health professionals, and families. Educational institutions should integrate comprehensive digital literacy programmes that extend beyond technical skills to include critical media literacy, algorithmic awareness, online safety, digital

citizenship, and emotional resilience. Policymakers should encourage greater transparency and accountability in platform design, particularly regarding recommendation algorithms, privacy protection, and mechanisms for reducing cyberbullying and misinformation. Social media companies should strengthen user protection measures through improved content moderation, enhanced privacy safeguards, and platform features that promote healthy digital engagement. Mental health practitioners and parents should recognise that the psychological consequences of social media are shaped by patterns of use rather than simply by screen time and should therefore encourage balanced, purposeful, and reflective digital participation.

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The findings are based on cross-sectional data, which limits causal interpretation. Self-reported measures may also be influenced by recall bias and social desirability bias. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means that patterns of youth engagement may continue to change as new technologies and applications emerge. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, experimental methodologies, and artificial intelligence-assisted behavioural analytics to examine the long-term implications of digital media use. Comparative studies across different socio-economic, cultural, and geographical contexts would also enhance the generalisability of the findings.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social media has fundamentally transformed contemporary youth culture by reshaping identity formation, interpersonal relationships, learning practices, and social participation. While digital platforms create unprecedented opportunities for communication, creativity, knowledge exchange, and professional development, they also introduce significant psychological and social challenges associated with social comparison, cyberbullying, algorithmic influence, and digital inequality. Maximising the benefits of social media while minimising its risks requires collaborative efforts among educators, policymakers, platform developers, families, and young users themselves. A balanced approach that combines digital innovation with ethical platform governance, evidence-based policy, and comprehensive digital literacy will be essential for fostering healthy, inclusive, and resilient digital societies in the future.

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