

Perceptions of High School Students on Social Media Usage

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ABSTRACT

This research is a phenomenological study that explored the perceptions of high school students in Killarney, a suburb of Bulawayo Zimbabwe, on the impact of social media usage (YouTube, Instagram and TikTok). The aim of the study is to investigate the perceptions of high school students in Killarney regarding the impact of social media usage. Interviews and focus group discussions were used as the primary method of data collection. A diverse group of 12 high school students was selected as the sample population. The data gathered from the interviews and focus group discussions was then analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns. The findings of the study reveal that the students expressed concerns about the negative consequences, such as addiction, decreased productivity, and a lack of focus on important aspects of life. However, some students also recognize the positive aspects, such as access to educational resources and exposure to diverse perspectives. Based on the findings, the study concludes that high school students in Killarney have mixed perceptions of social media usage. It highlights the need for promoting responsible social media use and finding a healthy balance between online and offline interactions.

Key Terms: Social media, Mental health, High school students, Tiktok, Instagram, YouTube.

INTRODUCTION

More research has also cited increase in levels mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness, cyberbullying, and peer pressure among teenagers because of social media [8]. However, the impact of social media on high school learners in Killarney, a suburb in Bulawayo Zimbabwe remains unexplored. The increasing availability and accessibility of social media platforms have led to a significant rise in the amount of time adolescents spend engaging with these platforms [11]. High school students are particularly vulnerable to the allure of social media due to their desire for social acceptance, peer influence, and the need to stay connected with their social networks. The mental health of high school students is a growing concern, and social media has been implicated as a potential contributing factor. Excessive social media usage has been associated with various mental health issues such as increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, body dissatisfaction, and decreased self-esteem [10]. By examining the problem of social media usage and its impact on the mental health of high school students in Killarney suburb, Bulawayo, this study intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic.

Objectives.

1. To explore high school students' beliefs on social media usage of TikTok, YouTube and Instagram
2. To explore the consequences of social media usage on high school students' mental health.
3. To explore ways to mitigate the negative impact of social media usage on high school students' mental health

Method

Population and Sampling

The population under study is high school students residing in Killarney, a medium density suburb in Bulawayo. The number of high school students in this area is not documented as such the population size could not be established. For sampling, two sampling methods were employed, namely the convenience sampling technique Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where data is collected from an easily accessible and available group of people. Twelve individuals who made the sample size were selected not because they are most representative of the entire population, but because they are most easily accessible to the researcher [4].

Data Collection Instruments

This research made use of focus group discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews to collect data. For focus group discussion a group of five (5) high school students residing in Killarney was gathered to discuss a research topic. For interviews a semi structured interview guide was utilized to ensure the impact of social media on high school students was discussed based on phenomenological encounters.

Research Procedure

The first step was to request for permission from the university to conduct the study. Since the research was not conducted in the school premises but at the homes of the high school learners, custodians of the learner were the next stop, the researcher sought their permission before proceeding with the study.

The researcher began the sampling process by identifying high school children who reside in

Killarney. This was be done by requesting those teenagers already known to the researcher to help recruit their peers in the neighborhood. Once the sampling process is done, the next step was to seek informed consent from the parents or guardians of the teenagers in the sample size for their participation in the study. Thereafter, convenient dates for data collection will be discussed with the participants.

The researcher ensured that the target population was high school students in Killarney Suburb, Bulawayo. Purposive and Snowballing technique were employed to select participants who are active social media users and fit into the predetermined criteria of inclusion. Considerations such as age, place of residence and social media platforms used were taken into account to ensure that the study was focused on a specific age group, using TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, and residing in Killarney. Since the present research is a case study, the sample size was determined based on recommended number of participants in a case study.

Research Design

For the study on the perceptions of high school students on social media usage and its impact on their mental health, a phenomenological research design was well-suited. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding the subjective experiences, meanings, and essences of individuals related to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of high school students regarding social media usage and its impact on their mental health in a holistic and in-depth manner. It seeks to uncover the essence of their experiences and how they make sense of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the phenomenological research design involved conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with high school students to explore their perceptions, beliefs, and subjective experiences related to social media usage and its impact on their mental health. The questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences freely. Probing questions were used to delve deeper into their responses and explore any emerging themes or patterns. The data collected through phenomenological interviews and focus groups was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying and organizing recurring themes or patterns in the participants' experiences and perspectives [9]. This analysis involved a systematic and iterative process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to generate overarching themes that capture the essence of the participants' perceptions.

By employing a phenomenological research design, the study provided rich and nuanced insights into how high school students perceive and make sense of their social media usage and its impact on their mental health. It allows for an exploration of the subjective realities of the participants, highlighting their unique perspectives and lived experiences. Like other forms of qualitative research designs, the researcher sought to explore, understand and present the participants' perspectives and get close to them in their own natural environment [3]. Interaction between participants and the researcher is required to produce data, which is an indication of the researcher's level of connection to and being immersed in the field. Because of this, constructivism and interpretivist commonly flow through the execution of this research design. The researcher's perceptions and interpretations become part of the research and as a result, a subjective and interpretive inclination runs throughout the inquiry [3]. Subjectivity is openly acknowledged and to manage this, the researcher embraces a reflexive position within the study, adopting methods such as journaling that support this position.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within a dataset [9]; it was employed to analyze the data collected in the present study. It involves a systematic and rigorous approach to organizing and making sense of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts or focus group discussions [12]. In the context of the study on the perceptions of high school students on social media usage and its impact on their mental health in the Killarney suburb of Bulawayo, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the phenomenological interviews or focus group discussions.

Findings Of the Study

Findings

The respondents were asked to provide their background information such as gender, age and education level. In terms of gender; 7 of the respondents were male while 5 were female. The disparity between genders is not significant to be considered as influencing the outcomes of the study. The participants of this present study included people from different age groups. There were 3 students distributed across four age groups; thirteen (13), fourteen (14), fifteen (15) and sixteen (16) years. This was done to give the researcher a comprehensive picture of the impact of social media on high school students.

Major theme 1: Beliefs on Social Media Usage.

The beliefs and attitudes towards social media usage among high school students in Killarney Suburb, Bulawayo varies among individuals, but there are some common themes that emerge.

Sub-Theme 1: Negative Beliefs and Attitudes about social media.

Students have negative beliefs about social media based on their recognition of the drawbacks and negative impacts of social media usage. Students acknowledge that excessive use can lead to addiction and negatively affect academic performance. They reported being cautious about the dangers of cyberbullying, privacy concerns, and the pressure to maintain a perfect online image. Decreased productivity, academic performance, and real-world social interactions. Attitude belief Students shared the belief that social media can grow into an addiction that affects their productivity, academic performance and real-life social interactions. One student's report embodied the subjective perspectives of others when she recounted that:

"Social media can be addictive, and some students may find it challenging to strike a balance between online and offline activities. Excessive social media consumption can lead to a decrease in real-world social interactions, affecting our interpersonal skills and relationships..." Student E: Female; Aged 15

Another student shared the same sentiments, agreeing on the belief that social media use can have negative repercussions on academic performance and productivity when he underscored that:

“Some students in our community tend to spend too much time on social media, which can lead to a decrease in productivity and academic performance.” Student I: Male; Aged 14

From this emerging theme, the researcher observed a belief and attitude that social media can be grow into an addiction that affects their productivity, academic performance and real-life social interactions.

The pressure to maintain a perfect online image and the prevalence of cyberbullying are significant concerns. However, there were concerns reported regarding the negative impact of social media. It was noted that some students become overly dependent on social media for validation and self-worth, seeking constant likes and comments. This can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Moreover, the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms is a significant issue that affects the well-being of high school students. It is essential for us to promote responsible and ethical social media usage and create a supportive online environment.

Sub-Theme 2: Positive Beliefs and Attitudes about social media

In terms of benefits, students in Killarney Suburb believe social media as a valuable tool for accessing information, networking, and exploring different perspectives. They acknowledge that it can enhance communication skills and provide educational resources. The following two extracts from the interviews sum these three emerging themes about positive beliefs and attitudes: enhanced communication, information sharing and self-expression (creativity);

"On one hand, it provides us with a platform to express ourselves, share our opinions, and engage in meaningful discussions. It can be a powerful tool for raising awareness about social issues and promoting positive change..." Student K: Male; Aged 16

"It allows us to stay connected with friends, share moments, and discover new interests. Social media platforms can be a source of inspiration and creativity, with students showcasing their talents and engaging in positive discussions. It also serves as a valuable source of information and a way to stay updated on current events." Student B: Female; aged 14

Data collected in relation to the positive beliefs and attitudes students in Killarney had in relation to the impact of social media coincided around the three sub themes namely enhanced communication, information sharing and self-expression (creativity).

Sub-Theme 3: Double-edged Sword

There was a general consensus that social media can be a double-edged sword, providing opportunities for self-expression and creativity, but also exposing individuals to a range of risks and challenges. The following excerpts bring out the beliefs that students have about the double-edginess of social media:

"I believe social media is a valuable tool for communication and staying connected with friends and family. However, excessive usage can lead to addiction and negatively impact academic performance." Student A: Male; Aged 14

"I think social media can be both helpful and harmful. It provides a platform for self-expression and sharing ideas, but it also exposes students to cyberbullying and the pressure to maintain a perfect online image." Student G: Female; Aged 16

"My attitude towards social media is cautious. While it can be entertaining and informative, it's important to use it responsibly and be aware of the potential risks and dangers associated with it." Student D: Male; Aged 16

The beliefs and attitudes towards social media usage among high school students in Killarney Suburb, Bulawayo reflects a cautious and nuanced perspective. The students appreciated the benefits it brings while being aware of the potential risks and challenges that come with it.

A. Major Theme 2: Merits of social media usage

Sub-Theme 1: Social media allows for communication, connectivity, and information sharing.

Students coincided on the view that social media is a conduit for enhanced communication, connectivity and information sharing which are paramount pillars in their social and academics development. One student's account articulately captured and summed the sentiments echoed by his other counterpart when he recounted:

“In my perception, social media usage among high school students in Killarney Suburb, Bulawayo has both positive and negative aspects. One of the benefits is the ease of communication and connectivity. Social media platforms allow us to instantly connect with friends, family, and even people with similar interests from around the world. It provides a convenient way to share information, ideas, and experiences. Moreover, social media can be a valuable educational resource, as it offers access to a vast amount of information and diverse perspectives.” Student A: Male; Aged 14

Sub-Theme 2: Educational Resource

All students highlighted that social media especially YouTube stands as a paragon of educational excellence with channels like Khan Academy and Coursera amongst others assisting students with subjects like mathematics, geography, accounts, history and many more. Students agreed that social media platforms like YouTube compliment their teachers' efforts with others indicating that their teachers ask them to watch some YouTube video as part of the tutorial. Comments from one of the interviewed students sums their shared perspective as she notes:

“Social media isn't all bad. In fact, it can be a valuable tool for education and exposure to diverse perspectives. There are countless educational resources available online, from tutorials and lectures to articles and research papers. It offers a platform for sharing knowledge and learning from experts in various fields... It's important to utilize social media in a way that promotes learning and growth, rather than just mindless scrolling. By following educational accounts and engaging in constructive conversations, we can make the most of the educational opportunities that social media provides.” Student D: Female; Aged 16

B. Major Theme 3: Demerits of social media usage

Sub-Theme 1: Addiction, decreased productivity, and a lack of focus on other important aspects of life.

From the gathered data it was observed, addiction, decreased productivity, and a lack of focus on other important aspects of life was emerging as the most prominent and pervasive theme from the interviews and discussions. One student poignantly elaborated this narrative summing the echoed views of her peers:

“Excessive social media usage is definitely a concern. Personally, I've seen how addictive it can be. There have been times when I've spent hours scrolling through my feed without even realizing how much time has passed. It's easy to get caught up in the constant updates and notifications. This addiction can lead to decreased productivity because instead of focusing on important tasks like homework or studying, I find myself constantly checking my phone for new posts. It's a major distraction. And not only that, but it also takes away from other important aspects of life. I've noticed that when I spend too much time on social media, I neglect spending time with my family and friends, or pursuing hobbies and interests. It's important to find a balance and not let social media consume our lives. Student D: Female; Aged 16

Her view is a reflection of other students indicating that social media can be addictive leading to decreased productivity, and a lack of focus on other important aspects of life.

Sub-Theme 2: Culture of comparison, low self-esteem, and cyberbullying.

It was common theme from the all students that social media has significantly influenced how high school students perceive themselves. The constant exposure to carefully curated and filtered posts can create unrealistic beauty standards and contribute to a culture of comparison. Students argued that they feel the need to conform to these standards and portray an idealized version of them, which has many times impacted their self-esteem and self-worth. It was observed that:

“Social media definitely has its negatives. One of the biggest issues I see is the culture of comparison it creates. When we see others posting about their seemingly perfect lives, it's easy to compare ourselves and feel inadequate. This can lead to low self-esteem and even depression. Additionally, social media has become a breeding ground for cyberbullying. People hide behind screens and say hurtful things to others without considering the consequences. This can have a devastating impact on someone's mental health.” Student E: Female; Aged 16

Sub-Theme 3: Validation and self-comparison

Another challenge with social media that was observed by interviewed students is the constant need for validation and popularity. Social media platforms like Instagram were observed to often revolve around the number of likes, comments, and followers one has. Students may feel pressured to gain social validation through their online presence, which can lead to a constant need for external approval and a negative impact on self-esteem. The fear of being judged or excluded can contribute to social anxiety and increased stress levels. Three students shared:

“I have noticed that some students experience a sense of comparison and self-criticism when they see the seemingly perfect lives of their peers on social media. This has led to feelings of inadequacy and a negative self-image. Some students have shared their struggles with low self-esteem and a constant need for external validation, which they attribute to the influence of social media.” Student E: Female; Aged 16

Sub-Theme 4: Affective Problems

Students agreed that one significant consequence is the risk of developing anxiety and depression. They added that constant exposure to curated and idealized versions of others' lives on social media can create feelings of inadequacy and a distorted self-image, leading to increased stress and negative emotions. Two students reflected these perspectives in a way that capture the essence of their counterparts' views:

“Personally, I have observed how social media usage has affected the mental health of high school students in our community. One of my friends became increasingly anxious and stressed out due to the constant pressure to maintain a perfect online presence. She felt compelled to post pictures and updates regularly, fearing that she would be left out or judged if she didn't. This constant need for validation and popularity took a toll on her self-esteem and overall well-being.” Student E: Female; Aged 16

In the same vein another shared view was, social media usage can disrupt the development of healthy coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills. Instead of dealing with real-life challenges and emotions, some students may turn to social media as a means of escape or distraction. This can hinder students' ability to effectively navigate and manage their mental health, leading to a reliance on social media as a coping mechanism.

Sub-Theme 7: Disrupted sleep patterns and fatigue

Students converged to the view of excessive social media usage disrupting sleep patterns and affecting overall mental well-being. They concurred that many students may find themselves staying up late to scroll through social media feeds, leading to inadequate sleep and fatigue. The constant exposure to screens and the blue light emitted by devices can also disrupt the body's natural sleep-wake cycle, resulting in difficulty falling asleep and poor quality of sleep. Lack of sufficient sleep can negatively impact mood, concentration, and overall mental health impacting both their academic, extracurricular and social performance.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of findings

Students have negative beliefs about social media based on their recognition of the drawbacks and negative impacts of social media usage. The research observed a belief and attitude that social media can grow into an addiction that affects their productivity, academic performance and real-life social interactions. Moreover, there are concerns regarding the negative impact of social media. Some students become overly dependent on social media for validation and self-worth, seeking constant likes and comments. This can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem [13].

Also, social media was seen as a conduit for enhanced communication, connectivity and information sharing which are paramount pillars in their social and academics development. Allen and colleagues agree with the findings of the current study [1]. Another challenge with social media that was observed by interviewed students is the constant need for validation and popularity. Similar to Hollenbaugh & Ferris's findings (2014), the current study observed that social media platforms like Instagram were observed to be often evolving around the number of likes, comments, and followers one has [5]. Students may feel pressured to gain social validation through their online presence, which can lead to a constant need for external approval and a negative impact on self-esteem. The fear of being judged or excluded can contribute to social anxiety and increased stress levels.

Another consequence of social media that was revealed by this study is increased susceptibility to cyberbullying. High school learners perceive social media platforms as providing an avenue for individuals to engage in harmful and hurtful behaviors, such as spreading rumors, posting negative comments, or even sending threatening messages. Such experiences were said to have a detrimental impact on the mental well-being of high school students, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts [2].

The present study discovered that excessive social media usage disrupts sleep patterns and affects overall mental well-being. It was revealed that students find themselves staying up late to scroll through social media feeds, leading to inadequate sleep and fatigue. The constant exposure to screens and the blue light emitted by devices can also disrupt the body's natural sleep-wake cycle, resulting in difficulty falling asleep and poor quality of sleep. These findings corroborate the discoveries made by Levenson and colleagues, who unraveled that excessive TikTok usage, particularly before bedtime, can disrupt high students' sleep patterns [6]. Poor sleep quality and quantity can have negative implications for mental health, including increased stress and decreased mood regulation [5].

Limitations of the study

One major limitation of the present study had to do with generalizability. The findings of a phenomenological study are context-specific and may not be easily generalizable to other populations or settings. The perceptions and experiences of high school students in Killarney Suburb, Bulawayo, may be influenced by unique cultural, social, and economic factors that differ from other regions or countries. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the results of this study to broader populations. Furthermore this phenomenological study as is with other studies of such design involved a small sample size of twelve students to ensure in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. However, the small sample size may limit the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, there is a possibility of selection bias as certain groups of students are overrepresented whilst others were underrepresented in the study. It is important to acknowledge that the perspectives of the selected participants may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the high school student population in Killarney Suburb.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study shows that social media has become an integral part of the lives of high school students, offering them numerous opportunities for communication, self-expression, and information sharing. However, excessive and unregulated social media usage can have detrimental effects on their mental health and poor

academic performance. Educating high school students about the responsible use of social media platforms is crucial. Schools should incorporate digital literacy programs into their curriculum to teach students about online privacy, critical thinking, and media literacy skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher suggests that schools should incorporate digital literacy programs into their curriculum to educate students about responsible social media usage and the potential impact on learners. These programs can teach students critical thinking skills, digital citizenship, and strategies for maintaining a healthy balance between online and offline activities thereby reducing the negative effects of social media. The researcher recommends that policy makers develop guidelines or policies that address social media use in educational settings, taking into account the potential impact on students' mental health. These guidelines can provide recommendations for schools, teachers, parents, and students on responsible social media use and strategies for maintaining a healthy balance. In addition, policy makers are called to allocate resources to support research initiatives focused on social media use and mental health among high school students. This research can provide evidence-based insights to inform policy decisions and interventions at both the local and national levels.

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