



Unfiltered Reality:
The impact of visual social media platforms
on the mental well-being of
young adults cross-culturally.

A Master Dissertation
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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Journalism & Public Relations, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation.

I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Park', written in a cursive style.

Dated: 03/08/2023

Abstract

In an increasingly digitalised world, the impact of social media (SM) on young adults' mental health (MH) represents a crucial investigation area. Thus, this dissertation's objective is to *investigate the impact visual social media platforms have on Generation Z (Gen Z) cross-culturally*. Through interviews with six NGOs including Irish, German, and US mental health experts (MHE) and a comprehensive literature review, the relationship between SM use and Gen Z's mental health (MH) is explored. Research questions include to what extent SM triggers mental health concerns (MHC) among young adults, what factors specifically trigger MH, and to what degree a universal issue is experienced. Potential key differences in NGOs were uncovered through interviews.

Lastly, potential approaches to prevent negative impact were assessed. It's suggested that SM has a significant influence on the young adult's MH. Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most popular and problematic platforms due to their visual and algorithm-driven nature. However, conflicting outcomes highlight the multifaceted and individual nature of SM's impact. Excessive usage patterns, active vs. passive usage, belonging to vulnerable groups, and certain design features including algorithms, filters, exposure to harmful content, and SM challenges revealed to be key factors. It has been suggested that individuals with existing MHC, teenagers, particularly young girls, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds or unstable support systems as well as individuals in uncertain life stages whether influenced by personal or external circumstances, tend to be at the highest risks. Interestingly, research revealed that excessive usage patterns are more depending on the user's behaviour patterns than time spent on platforms. Moreover, active SM usage has been linked to more positive well-being outcomes, than passive consumption.

The ever-evolving nature of SM platforms and the constant introduction of new design features challenges researchers to thoroughly evaluate the effects on MH. However, SM also offers positive aspects including community support and awareness-building, particularly for marginalised groups. To address the negative impact of SM, awareness campaigns, and increased accountability for SM companies are recommended. Collaboration between policymakers, MHEs, and technology companies is advocated to create a safer online environment.

The research highlights the universal nature of SM's impact on Gen Z's MH, transcending cultural differences. However, nuances exist among NGO recommendations, with countries emphasising different concerns. Strict age restrictions, mandatory ID sign-ups, and media literacy education are suggested as crucial measures by all. Additionally, app notifications promoting authenticity, and limiting screen time are proposed to raise awareness and encourage responsible SM usage.

In conclusion, this dissertation emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach to address the complex relationship between SM and young adults' MH. However, more accurate data from e.g., longitudinal studies are needed. To effectively implement global efforts, more countries especially those who significantly differ in economic and legislations, need to be compared.

By understanding these challenges and implementing effective strategies, a supportive digital environment for young adults, enhancing their well-being in the digital age can be created.

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List of Abbreviations

The following table describes the meanings of different abbreviations and acronyms utilised throughout this dissertation, along with the corresponding page numbers where they are initially found.

<i>Abbreviation</i>	Meaning	Page Number
<i>Fitspo</i>	Represents a popular buzzword obtained from 'fitspiration', a combination of the words 'fitness', and 'inspiration'.	First mentioned on p.8.
<i>FOMO</i>	Fear of missing out	First mentioned on p.16.
<i>Gen Z</i>	Generation Z, referred to individuals born between 1996 and 2010.	First mentioned on p.3.
<i>MH</i>	Mental Health	First mentioned on p.2.
<i>MHC</i>	Mental Health Concerns	First mentioned on p.4.
<i>MHE</i>	Mental Health experts (refers to experts interviewed from NGO's)	First mentioned on p.3.
<i>NGO</i>	Non-profit Organisation	First mentioned on p.3.
<i>SM</i>	Social Media	First mentioned on p.1.
<i>SNS</i>	Social Network Sites	First mentioned on p.1.
<i>WHO</i>	World Health Organisation	First mentioned on p.2

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Thank you!

1 Chapter One: Introduction

Since the early twenty-first century, the increased mobility and digital gadgets accessibility combined with the widespread usage of high-speed internet substantially impacted society, especially young individuals' time management and social interaction (Layte et al., 2023).

At this moment, over four billion individuals are using social network sites (SNS), equivalent to around 59,9% of the world's population (Kepios, 2023). As Kepios (2023) states, the number of people using SM has increased within the last year, with 150 million new users. This translates to a 3.2 percent annualised increase, or 4.7 new users being added on average every single second to SNS. This not only emphasise SM's relevance to individuals nowadays but also the need to understand SM's potential impact on individuals.

Overall, SNS are referred to as websites that allow individuals to *(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system* (Huang, 2017).

The SNS rise has also revolutionised production, consumption, and content distribution, as these platforms have empowered users to actively create and share diverse information through multiple mediums including photos, music, videos, and text (Feuston and Piper, 2018). According to Adam Alter, a professor of marketing and psychology, the boundaries between the online and offline worlds have become increasingly blurred, making it challenging to distinguish between the two, which further highlights the need to understand potential key drivers (Alter, 2017).

With the widespread use of smartphones, tablets, and computers, individuals can easily connect to SM platforms anytime and from virtually anywhere with internet access (Kepios, 2023). Consequently, it's obvious that SM significantly transformed human interaction, offering users unique opportunities to satisfy their social needs and connect with others in new ways (Kross et al., 2020). Digital technology has also altered how young individuals connect, communicate, express themselves, and seek support. Therefore, its immensely important to understand SM's impact, particularly on young adults.

It's conceivable that SM maintains to grow exponentially as technology advances tremendously and SNS capabilities increase (Wadsley et al., 2022). Consequently, there is

increasing demand to comprehend SM effects on MH, as there is rising worry about its addiction potential (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The World Health Organisation (*WHO*) defines MH as a condition of well-being that enables individuals to manage life's challenges, be aware of their capabilities, learn efficiently, produce fruitful results at work, and give back to their community (Pambudy, 2023). Individuals with poor MH are more likely to acquire mental illnesses and live shorter lives (Moreton and Greenfield, 2022). Although SM usage seems to be a global phenomenon, there is a notable lack of research to assess whether its effects are uniformly experienced across diverse countries. To address this gap, this study will focus on gathering and analysing relevant data from Germany, Ireland, and the USA, aiming to determine whether potential negative SM effects are cross-cultural concerns or demonstrate variations in impact among countries.

Additionally, it aims to uncover potential prevention strategies to be implemented on various levels to promote a healthier approach to SM use among young adults. By exploring preventive measures, the study seeks to identify actionable steps to be taken by SM platforms, governments, and other relevant stakeholders to reduce potential negative impacts. The goal is to offer evidence-based recommendations and insights to foster a more responsible and positive digital experience for young adults.

Understanding these influences is crucial for communications and journalism studies, as it prompts discussions about the potential harm caused by certain content and the responsibility of media professionals in promoting a safe and healthy media environment. Additionally, media professionals can play a role in raising awareness of SM's impact on MH through responsible reporting and educational campaigns. By disseminating research findings, journalists can help the public make informed decisions about their SM usage. Lastly, research findings on SM's impact on MH can inform policymakers and regulators about the need for guidelines and regulations to protect young adults from potential harm. Thus, communications professionals can advocate for responsible media practices and support evidence-based policies.

Considering the above aspects, this dissertation's main research objective is *to investigate the impact visual social media platforms have on Generation Z cross-culturally.*

To comprehensively address this objective, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *To what extent does social media trigger mental health concerns among young adults?*
 - 1.1. *What factors related to social media specifically trigger mental health concerns?*
2. *To what degree do we experience a universal issue?*
 - 2.1. *What are potential key differences based on Irish, German, and U.S. NGO data and reports?*
3. *Are there approaches to prevent the negative impact of social media?*
 - 3.1. *What do Irish, German, and US NGOs recommend when dealing with social media?*

By exploring these questions, this dissertation aims to gain valuable insights into SM's influence on young adults' MH, with a focus on potential variations across different cultural contexts. To achieve this, comprehensive literature reviews will be conducted by exploring existing literature on this topic. Additionally, MHEs working for NGOs will be interviewed to gather first-hand information. Considering the cross-cultural nature of this research, consultations with NGOs in different countries, including Germany, Ireland, and the US, will be conducted to understand potential disparities.

The first chapter represents the research objectives, corresponding questions, and the target audience, namely Gen Z. The second chapter conducts an in-depth examination of the existing literature surrounding SM, Gen Z, and potential connection to MH. Next, the third chapter outlines the methodology employed in this research, detailing data-gathering processes, including interviews and coding procedures.

The fourth chapter is divided into two parts. The first part presents the primary interview findings, while the second part offers a comprehensive analysis. During the analysis, the research findings from both the literature review and the interviews are compared and critically discussed. Lastly, the fifth chapter presents the conclusion summarising the overall study results, highlighting limitations, and providing recommendations for future research.

Overall, this research is essential in guiding the development of strategies and interventions that promote a healthier and more balanced digital engagement for individuals worldwide, especially the young Gen Z population.

1.1 The Target Group

To produce adequate results, this research will focus on a specific target audience based on various factors. Budenz et al. (2020) reported that approximately 75% of individuals with MHC experience initial symptoms before age 25, with the highest incidence occurring during young adulthood. Additionally, 90% of online SM users are aged 18 to 29 (Budenz et al., 2020).

Moreover, over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in mental illness prevalence among undergraduate students (Moreton and Greenfield, 2022). Interestingly, Budenz et al. (2020) also discovered a correlation between the age of onset for MHC and the average SM users.

Consequently, this research will concentrate on the correlation between SM usage, MHC, and young adults, aged 18 to 26, as this demographic represents a significant portion of both SM users and individuals who might be prone to MHC. This generation is also known as *Generation Z* and includes those born between 1996 and 2010. This generation's identity has been shaped by digitalization, climate fear, a changing financial environment, and COVID-19 (McKinsey, 2023). Thus, Gen Z confronts a historic crisis in behavioural health: a poll of US Gen Zs found they had the lowest outlook and the greatest mental illness rates of any generation (McKinsey, 2023). As the first generation to grow up with a constant internet presence, they are often called 'digital natives' (McKinsey, 2023). Due to their early SM engagement, they now represent the largest user group on most platforms (Amber Block, 2023). Additionally, Gen Zs are extremely online, nearly 50% check their SM daily (Coe et al., 2023). Overall, 66% of Gen Z consider SM usage crucial to their lives (Sprout Special, 2022).

As Gen Z enters adulthood, visual SM platforms have rapidly grown. Overall, 1.677 billion users are on TikTok globally (Ruby, 2023). In total, Gen Z users represent 60% of TikTok's user base and are now primarily shaping trends, sentiments, and culture through the app (McKinsey, 2023).

These aspects further underscore the need to investigate the potential link between the rise in SNS and Gen Z's MHC. As of April 2023, the USA has the largest TikTok audience, with 117 million engaged users, mostly aged 18-25 (Ceci, 2023). Germany follows with over 20.65 million TikTok users of 18 years or older (Kemp, 2023). Conversely, Ireland has a smaller TikTok user base of 106 thousand users, with the majority falling in the 18-24 age group (Start, 2023).

Instagram also represents a popular platform, with a global user base of 1.620 billion (Datareportal, 2023). The USA leads as the country with the largest number of users, reaching 143.35 million users, while Germany results with 27.45 million users (Dixon, 2023). Ireland has around 2.30 million users on Instagram (Kemp, 2023). Worldwide more than half of Instagram users are 34 years old or younger (Dixon, 2023).

These statistics underscore the significant presence of both TikTok and Instagram among respective countries and Gen Z and therefore represent the focus of further research.

2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, existing relevant literature has been reviewed to gain a first understanding of what has already been found surrounding the correlation between SM, young individuals, and MH.

2.1 Unravelling the driving forces of Gen Z's SM usage

Kepios (2023) found that the average SM user spends 2 hours and 24 minutes each day actively utilising or visiting an average of 6.6 distinct social sites. These data imply that people spend about 15% of their waking hours on SM if sleeping between 7 and 8 hours daily.

In 2020, young individuals in the EU spent twice as much time online compared to ten years ago, with an average of 2-3 hours daily on SM (Liberties EU, 2021). OECD (2018) data shows that the average 15-year-old student had been using the internet since the age of ten and spent 29 hours per week online in 2015, a significant increase from the average of 21 hours in 2012. This trend indicates a growing number of young individuals conducting their daily lives online (Liberties EU, 2021).

Numerous components can explain SM's incredible success (Montag and Elhai, 2023). To comprehend SM use, understanding individual usage reasons and their connection to excessive and problematic behaviours is fundamental (Wadsley et al., 2022).

Thus, identifying the key drivers behind Gen Z's extreme SM usage is essential especially due to their high online presence. Following the Uses and Gratification Approach, individuals seek specific media to satisfy various needs (Ruggiero, 2000). For SM, these needs include social interaction, information seeking, time passing, entertainment, and relaxation (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Verduyn et al. (2017) discovered that Gen Z value SM for simplifying the maintenance of relationships and expanding networks. Sprout Special's (2022) data revealed that Gen Z is the first-generation prioritising passing time on SM over communicating with loved ones and utilising it primarily for that purpose.

Research by Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) emphasised the importance of peer interaction for young adults' psychological development and the attainment of 'social capital', which refers to the benefits derived from interactions with others (Lin, 1999). Studies linked social capital, established through active SM use to improved MH and psychological resilience (Bargh et al., 2002). This is supported by the head of the psychology department at a German

University, Christian Montag, who finds SM to be an intriguing tool for individuals in their personal and professional lives, as it enables acquiring social capital and communication from one to many.

In today's digital age, Gen Z's strong online presence has led to perceptions that individuals without SM are virtually invisible (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown intensified the pressure to be online to maintain social connections, as physical contact with people beyond immediate family was limited (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022).

Another fascination of SM lies in the ability to control one's image. Receiving others' attention and approval seems to be a relevant driver behind Gen Z's motivation using SM (Stefano, 2011). On SM, users can easily alter their identity to present themselves exactly as they wish to be perceived by others (Wadsley, 2022). Studies demonstrated that gaining peer approval of SM content is linked to higher levels of subjective wellbeing and self-esteem (Burrow and Rainone, 2017). However, overreliance on approval from others to boost one's self-esteem negatively impacts one's wellbeing eventually (Crocker and Park, 2004).

Overall, social validation encourages SM usage to enhance social status. This can result in 'chasing the like' behaviour, where users share content for likes and delete posts with few likes, while constantly checking their accounts (Wadsley, 2022).

Moreover, some research proved young adults living with MHCs tend to use SM more frequently, with some using these channels to discuss their struggles and seek support (Budenz et al., 2020). Samaritans (2022) also emphasise the value of SM in providing access to vital information and connecting with others who understand and empathise with their struggles.

Another significant factor is Gen Z's enthusiasm for online engagement with companies. Data indicates that 76% find it helpful for communicating with brands, and 78% use SM to discover new brands (Sprout Special, 2022).

2.2 Virtual Social Media Platforms

While the exact origin of increased MHC remains uncertain, Moretown and Greenfield (2022) suggest that the rise of visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram may be contributing factors as these platforms are recognised as posing higher risks to MHC.

Given the proven popularity of Instagram and TikTok among Gen Z, subsequent research will prioritise examining the impact of these platforms on MH.

2.2.1 The Phenomenon of Instagram

Instagram is a highly popular platform with most users using it over 30 minutes daily (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022; Verrastro et al., 2020). With rising popularity, researchers are studying the influence on its user's well-being, resulting in a growing body of literature (Faelens et al., 2021). Particularly favoured by teenagers and young adults, who check their accounts daily, Instagram enables anyone to post images and videos with descriptions and engage through comments, shares, and likes (Perrin and Anderson, 2019; Faelens et al., 2021).

Originally designed to promote interactivity and use persuasion strategies for improved user experience and increased retention, SM have become adept at capturing and retaining our attention for profit (Alter, 2017). This popularity extends not only to individuals but also to businesses, as SM offers cost-effective means of reaching people, promoting companies, and generating income when compared to conventional media, such as television or radio (Lee, 2014). Therefore, it's a practical means of reaching people, promoting companies, and eventually generating income (Alghamdi and Bogari, 2020).

The marketing sector invests significant budgets in personalised ads based on users' digital footprints, demonstrating an immense interest in user information to increase the likelihood of people clicking ads and buying the product (Montag and Elhai, 2023).

As businesses recognised its potential, Instagram gained popularity and became a source of income for certain users known as influencers. Regardless of the users' age or type of promoted products, users with more likes and followers are more likely to receive advertising offers from businesses (De Veirman et al., 2017). Subsequently, users strive for popularity on this platform (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022).

Similarly, Ferreria (2017) points out that some individuals utilise SM to document their journey toward achieving the ideal body, offering advice on fitness and beauty products. These fitness influencers act with millions of followers, sharing their Fitspo (Fitness Inspiration) content. This content showcases the process of achieving the perfect physique by creating the impression that anyone can attain similar goals (Ferreira, 2017). Generally, influencers appear to hold significant control over their followers, influencing their purchase preferences and goals through the portrayal of an idealised figure and lifestyle.

Contrary to negative perceptions, Ferreria (2017) argues that SM influencers can have positive impacts on young individuals. Her research found that many people mentioned how

influencers' posts helped boost their self-confidence, cope with depression, and even influence career decisions.

2.2.2 The Psychology behind TikTok

TikTok, originally known as Musical.ly, is a Chinese mobile video-sharing production app that has captured young audiences' interest worldwide (Bresnick, 2019). It attracts young users to watch, create, and comment on global LipSync Videos (Montag et al., 2021).

The apps' unpredictability contributes to its popularity, as even the most absurd concepts can go viral among users (Bresnick, 2019). Moreover, the gratification of amusement needs drives various behaviours on TikTok, including passive content consumption, content creation, and social interaction (Bucknell et al., 2020). Additionally, motivation such as social circle building pursuing fame, and expressing creativity were identified (Omar and Dequan, 2020). However, there is limited psychological research attempting to comprehend TikTok use (Montag et al., 2021).

Since its launch in 2016, it has been downloaded over 3.5 billion times, with over 1.5 billion monthly active users (Grossman, 2023). TikTok achieved a billion users in three years, compared to Instagram's six years, and is one of the fastest-growing brands worldwide (Grossman, 2023). Young users, especially women, are highly active on TikTok in communicating and sharing information. Montag et al. (2021) emphasise the need to protect this vulnerable demographic from the negative effects of self-disclosure and to understand usage motivations, highlighting the importance of addressing associated issues for young users.

TikTok has faced criticism for promoting hatred, data protection concerns, privacy issues, and cyberbullying. Privacy invasions represent another worry as young users often produce TikTok videos in their private spaces, visible to the entire world (Neyaz, 2020; Anderson, 2020). Nevertheless, studies highlight TikTok's potential as an effective medium for educating young individuals on various topics including health, government releases, politics, tourism, online sales, and education (Montag et al., 2021).

However, users may encounter harmful health content, such as e-cigarette use, and find that TikTok's health information often misses essential requirements, as seen in discussions about acne (Montag et al., 2021; Tan and Weinreich, 2020). The algorithm on TikTok's personalised video stream, namely the 'For You' page can understand quickly what users enjoy, often

resulting in longer-than-planned usage and potentially addictive behaviour, as it keeps displaying content based on user's current viewing habits (Montag et al., 2021).

2.3 Understanding Excessive Social Media Use

China recognised internet addiction as a psychiatric illness in 2008, and in 2013, the American Psychiatric Association expanded the term 'behavioural addiction' to include a broader category (Barekat, 2017). Nevertheless, excessive SM use, relevant to the study of MH is not yet recognised by the WHO, leading to the ongoing discussion regarding its definition and evaluation methods (Montag et al., 2023).

Following Griffiths (2010) SM addiction involves using it to control negative moods, obsessive thoughts, and experiencing negative effects on personal and professional life (Griffiths, 2010). Gender, age, and personality traits (e.g., high neuroticism, low conscientiousness, female gender, and younger age) can contribute to excessive SM use, yet further research is needed to fully understand the underlying reasons (Montag and Elhai, 2023).

Montag and Elhai (2023) highlight that prolonged use does not automatically indicate addiction and emphasise that existing research does not assert the equations 'more time on SM = decreased well-being' when exploring connections between SM use, life satisfaction, and emotional pleasure.

While not all long-term SM users are addicts, addictive-like behaviour is associated with excessive online time including cases of influencers (Montag and Elhai, 2023). Continuous scrolling or refreshing newsfeed can create a hypnotic state known as ludic loops, like obsessive slot machine use (Wadsley, 2022). Pambuddy's (2023) study also emphasised how SM users and algorithms curate content, often resulting in individuals feeling worse. These design elements contribute to excessive and harmful usage (Noë et al., 2019).

Montag and Elhai (2023) stress that the SM business model is established to create extremely engaging platforms that encourage heavy usage, as long-term user engagement provides SM firms with valuable psychological insights, enabling microtargeting. Teams of engineers and researchers from marketing agencies and technology businesses are adept at manipulating prolonged usage (Alter, 2017).

2.4 Social Media and Mental Well-being

This transformation in communication and expression has presented both opportunities and challenges for Gen Z (OECD, 2018). Nevertheless, Coe et al. (2023) claim that similar to any other relationship between 18 and 24, the connection a young person has with SM is complex and cannot be generalised.

The Mayo Tusla Youth Advisory Committee (2019) criticises the tendency to associate youth culture, SM, and poor MH with negative connotations, stating that it's easier to identify drawbacks for young individual's MH and urging a more balanced perspective that also considers potential benefits. Nevertheless, numerous studies explored SM use on happiness and MH, identifying significant psychological factors (Faelens et al., 2023).

Understanding the causal interferences remains challenges due to the limitations of existing literature, which often relies on cross-sectional data and temporal trend analysis. Thus, Layte et al. (2023) call for further research to identify specific mediating mechanisms, though patterns suggest declines in self-esteem and poorer sleep quality may play a role in the link between high SM participation and depression symptoms.

Although around 65% of Gen Z's use SM to connect, shop, gather knowledge, and keep up with loved ones, the detrimental effect on MH cannot be ignored (Salam, 2023). There's credible evidence of clinical diagnosis and adolescent psychiatric disorder increase and worsening well-being among young women in high-income countries, potentially linked to screen-based activities (Layte et al., 2023).

While SM offers convenient access to information and knowledge, it also provides unrestricted access to harmful content, such as online harassment and bullying facilitated by the platforms' increasing popularity (Layte et al., 2023) Montag and Elhai (2023) warn against the negative impact of online hate speech, disinformation campaigns on society and people's well-being, and the potential threat to personal privacy due to the enormous data SM generates. Consequently, as the younger generation heavily relies on online interactions with friends and family, they become more vulnerable to bullying, rumours, and developing distorted perceptions of others' lives (Liberties EU, 2021).

A study by the Royal Society of Public Health revealed that Instagram contributed to sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and negative body image among people aged 14-24 (Mayo Tusla Youth Advisory Committee, 2019).

Moreover, Samaritans' Ireland raises concerns over the inadequate addressing of the circulation of self-harm information on platforms (Samaritans, 2022). Recent research revealed 83% of users encountered self-harm content without seeking it, through personalised feeds like Instagram's 'explore' or TikTok's 'for you' pages (Samaritans, 2022). 76% of respondents increased their self-harm severity from watching such content. Samaritans (2022) found that users typically encounter self-harm content online at age 14 or younger, emphasising the need for a safer internet environment.

While SM appears to be a fascinating concept stuffed with ideas, viewpoints, and diverse personal accounts, it often distorts reality, transmitting the impression of a carefree, flawless existence and fostering unrealistic expectations (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022).

A reason represents the use of enhancement and beauty filters which has been linked to increased social comparison and negative impacts on users' self-esteem (Jiang and Ngien, 2020). Trub and Rosenthal (2016) found that with the rise of enhancement and beauty filters, Instagram users tend to exaggerate positive life scenarios. As a result, individuals strive for unattainable ideals, questioning why their lives are not flawless as those portrayed online (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). In other words, SM has been linked to perceptions of others having happier and better lives, contributing to feelings of dissatisfaction and envy (Chou and Edge, 2012). Additionally, idealised photo comparisons contribute to body dissatisfaction (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016). This body dissatisfaction has been linked to depression, particularly among women and less popular individuals (Nesi and Prinstein, 2015). Yoon et al. (2019) also found a strong association between engaging in negative social comparison and depression. An example accused of excessive picture manipulation is Kim Kardashian, who is said to have lost her natural appearance (Salam, 2023). Constant exposure to influencers' idealised bodies may influence those who do not feel accepted by these beauty standards, possibly resulting in eating disorders and body dysmorphia (Salam, 2023).

The impact of digitally altered images on body image perception is especially significant among young girls who may struggle to differentiate between actual and digitally changed bodies (Meier, 2013). Comparing oneself to celebrities can harm young individuals who compare themselves striving to be thinner, more muscular, or prettier, impacting their self-respect and dignity (Prajapati, 2018). Female users, in general, experience greater body monitoring than non-users (Cohen et al., 2017). The portrayal of thinness and artificial body proportion can set unrealistic beauty standards, leading to beauty ideals internalisation and increased body image worries among girls (Wang et al., 2019). Ferreira (2017) argues that the emphasis on

physical attractiveness in SM has evolved into a societal duty to attain unrealistic beauty standards associated with a young, fit, slim body. Such body image worries can result in digital dysmorphia (Wang et al., 2019). Staniewski and Awruk (2022) define digitised dysmorphia as the gap between someone's actual appearance and SM beauty standards.

Thus, studies uncovered publishing, watching, and commenting on image-based SM material is linked to disordered eating and negative body image effects, and poorer self-esteem (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). This is supported by Moreton and Greenfield (2022) who also linked Instagram to eating disorder symptoms, especially among preadolescent girls. Turner et al. (2017) also connected Instagram use to orthorexia nervosa, a disorder involving food anxiety, dietary restrictions, and potential malnutrition in individuals emphasising healthy eating. Besides, Griffiths et al. (2018) found that visual platforms cause higher eating disorder symptoms in male sexual minorities.

On the other side, Faelens et al. (2021) found mixed results concerning the relationship between Instagram use and disordered eating and body image, suggesting that individual usage patterns and self-reported comparison impact the outcomes. Nevertheless, Engeln et al. (2020) confirmed that undergraduate women using Instagram experienced higher levels of negative affect and body dissatisfaction compared to those without. Another survey among 425 college students showed that those using SM frequently perceive others as having happier and better lives (Chou and Edge, 2012).

Furthermore, Boursier et al. (2020) found that individuals with higher body surveillance and appearance anxiety are more likely to upload self-images on SM seeking confidence-boosting feedback. Similarly, (Chatzopoulou, 2020) noted users were discouraged from posting self-images if their bodies didn't match the suggested ideal. Overall, specific Instagram usage patterns such as (1) taking or editing selfies or (2) engaging with Fitspo material report more negative body-related consequences (Faelens et al., 2021). Male users in the Instagram fitness community have lower self-esteem and a stronger drive to achieve the ideal physique (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the impact of Instagram use on MH seems to vary depending on the level, duration, and purpose of use. While Matthews et al. (2019) found a clear link between frequent Instagram use and reduced happiness, Faelens et al. (2021) did not find a direct connection to depression symptoms. Exposure to comedy or body-positive content, on the other hand, increased individuals' body satisfaction (Faelens et al., 2021).

Moreover, TikTok is believed to encourage upward social comparison and the fear of missing out, potentially impacting one's identity and self-perception through lip-syncing to idols. However, due to the platform's recent success, it's too early to speculate on potential psychological impacts (Montag et al., 2021). However, TikTok content consumption is often driven by a desire to escape, while self-expression is associated with active participation and content generation (Montag et al., 2021). Montag et al. (2021) highlight the importance of studying socio-demographics and personality factors to better understand passive and active TikTok usage as it's too early to speculate on potential psychological impacts.

Recent research by Peterka-Bonetta et al. (2021) also emphasise the importance of distinguishing between active and passive SM use. While passive use refers to reading and browsing, active use involves posting, sharing, and commenting (Montag et al., 2021). While the impact of passive vs active SM usage on well-being is debated, with inconsistent findings, reading others' content on SM is linked to anxiety, depression, and stress for young adults, the active generation and sharing of content has shown to reduce stress (RTE, 2023). Consequently, active SM engagement correlates with increased psychological well-being, while passive consumption is associated with reduced well-being (Liu et al., 2019) Bij de Vaate et al. (2020) warn that passively consuming selectively provided material can harm MH. A psychologist and lecturer at Bournemouth University justifies that passive SM lacks conversations and self-disclosure, hindering connectivity and social support. This can cause users to feel excluded and isolated, leading to intensified loneliness, tension, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (RTE, 2023).

Surveys conducted in 26 countries indicate that SM use increases worry and anxiety among Gen Z compared to previous generations (Pambudy, 2023). Based on numerous research publications on psychological factors, social support, social capital, self-presentation, and self-esteem have been observed as intermediary variables linking SM usage to MH, which will therefore be explored in the following (de Vaate et al., 2020; Faelens et al., 2021; Verduyn et al., 2017; Jackson & Luchner, 2018; Lee et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017).

a) Social Support

It was mentioned that social support on SM benefits Gen Z by providing psychological and MH support (Salam, 2023). Finding acceptance, a place to fit in, and an identity are developmental challenges of adolescence. As Gen Z is navigating this life stage at a period of unparalleled complexity, feedback, and approval from an unmediated global audience can support in such times (Madden, 2022). According to the Jed Foundation SNS offer effective forums for young individuals to interact. They particularly help underrepresented groups, such as the LGBTQ community or girls of colour, in finding supportive communities (Bertone, 2023).

An expanding number of influencers with millions of followers are rising awareness about MH. They emphasise the importance of normalising discussions about MH, seeking help, and watching out for friends (Salam, 2023). Thus, it can help identify warning signals for professional help, even though it does not replace therapy (Salam, 2023).

b) Social Capital

Over 50% of Gen Z respondents in a McKinsey Health Institute survey revealed social connectedness as an SM advantage (Pambudy, 2023). Sharing one's identity can bring satisfaction, regardless of others' evaluation (Wadsley, 2022), which is especially crucial for people lacking social skills or needing to reach a broader audience outside their social groupings (Caplan, 2005). Coe et al. (2023) highlight that especially young refugees and asylum seekers often rely on SM to maintain connections and reduce loneliness.

Since socialising became location-independent, Gen Zs invest in connections even when separated by using SM (Madden, 2022). Clark et al. (2018) highlight the advantages of SM in forming deep interpersonal ties, however, Wadsley (2022) warns about the limited potential to form lasting relationships. AmberBlog (2023) alerts that shallow online conversation often lacks emotional depth, which can lead to loneliness and isolation.

Based on Ehmke (2023), young individuals prefer communicating on their phones, hindering the development of in-person friendships. The author fears that relying on SM and phone for communication may cause severe anxiety in later years (Ehmke, 2019)

c) Self-Presentation

On SM, people showcase their best selves, highlighting accomplishments, vacations, relationships, and physical looks (AmberBlog, 2023). The rise of visual SNS has led to an increase in self-presentation content (Faelens et al., 2021).

Self-presentation allows self-expression, which has positive effects on MH (Coe et al., 2023). Respondents from all generations noted that SM positively influenced their ability to express themselves and interact with others (Salam, 2023).

In fact, research suggests that asking others to show their SM profiles boosts their self-esteem (Gentile et al., 2012). Consequently, to be perceived positively, users primarily share positive traits and life events on SM, which can have implications for their well-being (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

Nevertheless, carefully crafting online personas can have negative effects, such as feeling worse when comparing our lives to others on SM (Verduyn et al., 2020). Madden (2022) goes a step further claiming Gen Z's exposure to filtered content and the urge to project a specific online persona during critical years create a problematic environment.

Consequently, SM can make users feel inadequate or left out when viewing perfect lifestyles displayed on Instagram, by friends or even strangers (Hovorka, 2020).

- **FOMO**

Staying informed about others' lives and activities online can create exclusion and anxiety, intensifying until user's login to check their accounts (Wadsley, 2022). Moreover, the desire to stay connected is strongly related to FOMO (Przybylski et al., 2013). A McKinsey survey revealed the fear of missing out (FOMO) is a common concern among Gen Z associated with SM design components (Pambudy, 2023; Alutaybi et al., 2019). Some people even purposefully induce FOMO in others through SM (Hetz et al., 2015).

- **Social Comparison**

Furthermore, idealised self-presentation on SM fosters social comparison and self-/body evaluation processes, significantly impacting MH (Verduyn et a., 2017). Constant comparison is harmful to self-esteem and body image, particularly for Gen Z (AmberBlog, 2023).

Comparing oneself to others can lead to jealousy and envy, which can result in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Hovorka, 2020). Upward social comparisons, especially focusing on others' abilities, have a stronger negative effect (Yang et al., 2018). Depressed individuals and those prone to social comparison are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of SM comparison (de Vries et al., 2017). SNS algorithms frequently encourage comparison by displaying content aligned with users' choices and interests, reinforcing limited beauty standards and an 'ideal' appearance (AmberBlog, 2023).

d) Self-Esteem

Comparing looks, expertise, or lifestyle with others can drastically affect one's self-esteem (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). Self-esteem refers to the subjective assessment of one's value (Minev et al., 2018). Social comparison-oriented people tend to have lower self-esteem and more negative feelings (Jang et al., 2016). These comparisons can especially harm teenagers' developing self-esteem (Layte et al., 2023). Moreover, negative self- and body evaluations on SM can contribute to disordered eating, body image issues, and self-esteem issues (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

According to the National Eating Disorders Association, SM negatively impacted the body image of 70% of Gen Z respondents. Spending over two hours daily on SM was associated with a higher likelihood of reporting a negative body image among Gen Z (AmberBlog, 2023).

Unrealistic beauty standards affecting Gen Z's self-image result from SM filters and editing tools that allow users to alter their appearance such as their waist size or the texture or skin texture, in unrealistic ways (Amberblog, 2023). These tools foster inaccurate expectations and worsen feelings of inadequacy and poor self-esteem.

Girls experience greater pressure to use SM and higher anxiety levels (Mayo Tusla Youth Advisory Committee, 2019) Moreover, female Gen Z's are more likely to report a distorted body image and lack of self-confidence (Salam, 2023).

Taking a seven-day break from Instagram has been found to improve life-satisfaction and positively impact women, while reducing overall SM use improves young adults' body perception (Fioravanti et al., 2020; Salam, 2023).

2.5 How social media could be improved

Overall, Budenz et al. (2020) require Instagram to prioritise encouraging feedback instead of idealised self-portraits when young adults disclose their MH.

Bertane (2023) urges technology companies to prevent product abuse and share evaluation information with outside researchers. They recommend creating a scientific safety and advisory group to influence strategies and regulations for user protection. Besides, it urged to consider user health and safety by including time restrictions and digital breaks, encouraging young individuals for real-world connections (Bertane, 2023).

Liberties EU (2023) requires the EU to establish a mechanism obligating organisations publishing online advertisements within the EU to register and ensure content accountability. Samaritans CEO Bentley argues that harmful content should not be tolerated at all, just as unsolicited material in one's letterbox would not be tolerated. SM must take this issue seriously to prevent users from accessing such content (Samaritans, 2022). Thus, Liberties EU (2023) urges SM companies to disclose their algorithms and content selection processes, while Bertane (2023) suggests promoting algorithm transparency across SM platforms to make users aware of their experience is influenced. Samaritans (2022) calls for enhanced help options, increased user choices, and prevention of suicide or self-harm-promoting content. For instance, policymakers could implement regulations requiring technology firms to develop protective algorithms and content that directs young individuals to helpful information (Bertane, 2023). Additionally, Bertane (2023) insists that tech companies disable algorithms promoting harmful content and instead prioritise mentally beneficial content.

Since 2019, certain websites' have implemented changes to their self-harm and suicide policies, including image blurring and posting limits, but further content-specific trigger notice for self-harm and suicide is required (Samaritans, 2022).

Moreover, The Jed Foundation calls for policy makers to create age-appropriate safety guidelines ensuring internet privacy for young individuals (Bertone, 2023). Adults should increase awareness of the importance of SM in intergenerational communication and encourage responsible usage rather than imposing restrictions (Mayo Tulsa Youth Advisory Committee, 2019). Involving young individuals in planning and implementing changes to reduce harm and promote well-being can be highly beneficial (Bertane, 2023). Consequently,

a specialised national support program for SM issues is required, while the Jed Foundation urges policymakers to promote media literacy and fund research (Bertone, 2023).

Educated support adults, including teachers, should refute myths about SM use and promote responsible usage and engage young individuals in legislation development for effective online protection (Samaritans, 2022).

Lastly, the Jed Foundation calls for investment in extensive studies on SM interventions, preventive measures, and MH consequences, along with support for local organisations facilitating offline interactions (Bertane, 2023).

3 Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology applied. The methodology employed in this research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of SM's impact on Gen Z's MH. The primary objective is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of MHEs working for NGOs in Germany, the USA, and Ireland.

By conducting interviews with six carefully selected NGOs from these countries, this study explores the global dimensions of the issue, considering diverse viewpoints to provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between SM and the MH of young adults.

This chapter further entails an in-depth discussion of the study's ethical considerations, which include how informed consent was obtained and confidentiality maintained. It further describes the data-gathering process, specifically focusing on the structured interviews conducted with NGOs specialised in MHC among young adults. Lastly, the study's limitations and difficulties are addressed, along with sample size restrictions, researcher biases, and practical issues.

3.1 Research Design

To explore this topic's complexity and answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was chosen. The topic was investigated by conducting six structured interviews with MHEs working for NGOs specialised in this concern. This approach aimed to investigate whether SM's impact on Gen Z's MH is experienced uniformly across these countries.

As Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan (2022) state, qualitative research is exploratory, therefore the interviews included open-ended questions focussed on the 'how' and 'why'. Through open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to express their views freely, revealing valuable insights into how SM affects Gen Z's MH in the context of their respective countries. This approach facilitated the identification of common patterns, similarities, and disparities in MHEs experiences, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of the issue's universality or regional distinctiveness.

Moreover, this methodological choice aimed to dive deeply into the participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of SM's impact on Gen Z's MH.

To gain a first understanding of the topic, existing material including websites, newspapers, journals, government reports, databases, and statistics was assessed, as visible in the literature review. This strategy allowed for an in-depth understanding of the first-hand experiences and participants' perspectives while drawing insights from existing literature.

3.2 Justification of the chosen Research Design

3.2.1 Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was chosen to comprehensively explore SM and its potential impact on Gen Z's MH, as it offers in-depth insights into such real-world problems (Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). Moreover, this qualitative approach enabled the identification of nuanced and often overlooked issues that reflect the complex social reality faced by Gen Z in their digital environment (McLeod, 2023).

The research's purpose of identifying potential correlations between SM and MHC aligns with the qualitative approach as it aims to generate thorough topic descriptions, and discover new insights, and interpretations (McLeod, 2023). By seeking first-hand information from MHEs, this approach proved most suitable, allowing for an in-depth examination of the research objective. Furthermore, it aims to generate thorough topic descriptions and discover new insights and interpretations (McLeod, 2023). As this research's objective is to detect first-hand information from MHEs, this approach proved to be the most suitable. By collecting and asking participants about their experiences, perception, and opinion, an in-depth examination of the research's objective was enabled.

Moreover, this approach was chosen as it provides the capacity to explain Gen Z behaviour patterns and processes that might be challenging to quantify (Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). Furthermore, an inductive research approach was applied, as this research aimed to develop a theory instead of testing an existing theory as would be the case with a deductive approach (Streefkerk, 2019). The qualitative research goal is to comprehend social reality as closely as possible to how its participants experience or live it (McLeod, 2023). Hence, individuals and their organisations are examined in their natural environment and interviews were conducted directly with NGO representatives.

3.2.2 Significance of Structured Interview Design

A structured interview design with open-ended questions was chosen as it allows a systematic and standardised approach to collecting NGO data while providing flexibility in probing and follow-up questions (George and Merkus, 2022).

As every participant was asked the same questions throughout the interview, this approach warrants consistency across participants and enables comparison and results analyse (Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). It also increases their reliability and validity (George and Merkus, 2022). By asking the same questions to all participants in the same order, the possibility of introducing bias through the order or nature of the questions, or by any environmental circumstances, was reduced (George and Merkus, 2022).

Furthermore, a one-on-one approach was selected as research advises that its suitable for sensitive topics and/or topics that require an in-depth exploration, such as the correlation between SM and MH (Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). Furthermore, structured interviews supported keeping balance over the interview process and the participant's freedom to share their opinions and experiences, which was relevant for this research.

3.3 Data Collection Process

For this research purpose, data were collected by interviewing MHEs. Thus, data has been directly gathered from the source instead of relying on information collected by a third party. This independent primary research process entailed collecting data through six structured interviews.

To ensure all interviews can be used for this research, each interview was recorded and stored on a trusted device. Additionally, each interview has been carefully transcribed (see Appendix D). After transcribing all interviews, the data evaluation process began, as elaborated in the following.

3.3.1 Selection and Recruitment of Participants

As the research focusses on three different countries, a balanced representation of each nation was desired. Therefore, two NGOs were chosen from each country to enable comprehensive data collection and thorough analysis.

To identify suitable organisations for participation, several techniques were applied. Only MH-focused NGOs with experiences working with young adults were contacted, and a literature review and networking efforts were conducted to find potential interview partners, including recommendations from relevant groups or associations.

Once potential NGOs were identified, they were contacted to request their cooperation. During this process, it was essential to highlight the significance of their expertise, underscoring their valuable role in shaping the study's conclusions and potential benefits for future research. Upon securing the NGOs' agreement to participate, suitable interview candidates within each NGO were identified, and careful selection ensured validity and quality. The recruitment of interview participants was guided by specific criteria to ensure knowledgeable individuals' representation.

First, participants needed to be experienced MHEs in the field of SM and youth. An email was sent to each organisation beforehand to outline the research's purpose and interview questions, and subsequently, the most suitable MHEs within each NGO were identified through collaboration. Next, participants were recruited from various roles within the NGOs to capture diverse viewpoints. These included representatives working in management, communication, and other position related to MH support.

Other criteria included their willingness to participate. To ensure informed consent and maintain ethical practices, the participation of interviewees was voluntary, and the option to stop the interview was given at any time. Participants were also fully informed about the research’s goals and the interviewing method.

By adhering to these criteria, the research aimed to assemble a qualified and diverse group of participants providing valuable perspectives on SM impacts on Gen Z’s MH across organisational and cultural contexts.

Based on the above criteria following MHEs were recruited for the study:

Name	Role	NGO	Established	Location
Lucia Kleemann	Mental Health Professional and Communications Officer	Mental Health Crowd	2015	Munich, Germany
Ronald Stolz	Chief Executive Officer	Aktiv gegen Mediensucht e.V. (Engl: active against media addiction)	2008	Iller, Germany
Maria Walsh-Healy	Operations Manager	Mental Health Ireland	1966	Dublin, Ireland
Fiona Flynn	Youth Development Manager	Bodywhys	1995	Dublin, Ireland
Jamie Nunez	Western Regional Manager	Common Sense	2003	California, USA
Brian Higgins	Executive & Creative Director	Mental Healthy F.i.T.	2006	Utah, USA

Figure 2: Recruited MHEs for Interviews

The first interview was conducted with Lucia Kleemann, MH professional, and communication officer at Mental Health Crowd. The German NGO blends personal experience and professional expertise to redefine MH (Mental Health Crowd, 2023). She was chosen for the interview due

to her extensive experience in working with SM and youth, making her highly knowledgeable about their connection.

A second interview took place with Ronald Stolz, CEO of Aktiv gegen Mediensucht e.V., the largest self-support platform for media addiction and internet-related disorders in the German-speaking area (Aktiv gegen Mediensucht e.V., 2022). Given his experience in working with media-addicted individuals, he represented the ideal person to ask about excessive usage and its implications.

A third interview was organised with Maria Walsh-Healy, operations manager at Mental Health Ireland, the country's oldest MH charity (Mental Health Ireland, 2023). It has played a vital role in transforming public perceptions of MH and has been actively involved in rehabilitation and shaping national policy objectives. With her extensive experience and work with Gen Z, she possesses a wealth of knowledge about recent MHC among young individuals and their potential connections to SM.

The second Irish interview was conducted with Fiona Flynn, the Youth Development Manager at Bodywhys, the eating disorders association of Ireland, helping people affected by eating disorders. The organisation's mission is to offer support, raise awareness and foster understanding of eating disorders within the community, while also advocating for the rights and healthcare needs of those impacted by eating disorders. Her specialisation in eating disorders and related causes provided a unique opportunity for gaining deep insight into potential correlations between these disorders and SM usage.

The next interview was conducted with Brian Higgins, executive and creative director at Mental Healthy F.i.T. Founded and located in Utah, USA, the organisation works to eradicate MH stigma, especially among young individuals, through impact, fun, and education (Mental Healthy, 2023). Considering his focus on young adults, including Gen Z, and specialisation in MHC he is well-positioned to explore potential correlations between MH and SM usage.

Another interview was held with Jamie Nunez, Western Regional Manager at Common Sense, a leading MH organisation in California, USA, focused on creating a compassionate and inclusive digital environment for young adults (Common Sense, 2003). Its mission is to help young adults navigate the complexities of technology, wisdom, and integrity. He has been chosen for his extensive digital knowledge and expertise in creating a healthier online environment, which allowed him to identify contributing harmful factors from platforms.

3.4 The Interview Procedure

The interviews were scheduled in advance via email and conducted online using Zoom in June and July 2023. Each interview had a duration of 30-45 minutes.

Online qualitative research is a novel approach, which offers unique benefits. The online interviews were convenient and cost-effective, eliminating travel expenses, and venues. Furthermore, the online format's anonymity potentially contributed to more open and honest responses (Onepoll, 2022).

Each interview was recorded and transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription, a method that transcribes every word while omitting pauses, statuses, and filler words, and improving grammar (Delve, 2022). Comments on behaviours (e.g., laughing, sobbing, pausing), a phonetic transcription of dialects, and filler words were disregarded.

3.5 Interview Question Guide

To ensure consistency and coverage of all relevant questions, an interview guide (see Appendix C) was created in advance, serving as an organised framework for the interviews. The guide includes predetermined open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to express their feelings and explore their ideas. It also ensures uniformity and standardisation throughout the interviews (Estudio, 2023). To build rapport and clarify research goals, the questionnaire began by giving participants an overview of the research purposes and objectives. Each participant was informed that the research aims to detect potential correlations between SM and Gen Z MH conditions and identify possible preventive measures.

To provide a comprehensive overview and facilitate the analysis, the interview questions were categorised into three groups. The first category focused on general SM use to uncover average usage among young adults, the most problematic platforms, vulnerable groups, harmful content, and negative outcomes associated with prolonged SM use. The second category addressed MHC among young adults and the potential relation to SM. Next, the third category explored measures to promote a healthier relationship between youngsters and SM, along with specific guidelines and strategies for platforms to implement to prevent MHC among young adults. The questions additionally sought to explore perspectives on potential legislation or guidelines that the government could introduce to protect vulnerable (young) individuals from the potential negative impacts of SM and to uncover any innovative approaches to create a healthier SM environment.

Lastly, interviews sought advice on effective ways for youngsters to navigate and manage their SM use and the opportunity to share any additional insights. This approach promoted participation and ensured candidates felt respected and heard.

The guide contains incisive questions in addition to the essential ones. These questions are meant to nudge participants to elaborate on their experiences and viewpoints by offering more in-depth responses. To gain a deeper knowledge of participants' opinions, probing questions sought clarification, provided examples, and explored different perspectives.

3.6 Data Evaluation

Each interview has been recorded with a phone and transcribed. Later, the interview transcriptions were carefully examined to establish a familiarisation with the content and context. Next, an initial coding process was applied. Therefore, the data was divided into meaningful segments and labelled with descriptive codes. The segments included usage patterns and concerns; vulnerable groups and risk factors; harmful content; Gen Z, MH, and SM; positive aspects of SM, and improving the platform's health, including the role of government and prevention and education. Each interview then has been examined and responses matching the respective category were written in a separate document.

This step identified key concepts and ideas expressed by MHEs during the interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted, where recurring themes and connections across the interviews were explored with an increased focus on cultural differences. Throughout the evaluating process, constant comparison was performed.

Once all interview findings were categorised, conclusions were drawn and interpreted. During this process, the findings were contextualised within the broader research questions and objective.

3.6.1 Data Verification and Validation

Data verification and validation are vital for confirming the accuracy, reliability, and validity of collected data in this research. While often used interchangeably, they reflect different phases of the data quality assurance process.

To ensure the interview questions' clarity, fellow students peer-reviewed all questions which removed unclear terminology. They also reviewed the data for accuracy and comprehensiveness, ensuring the questions aligned with the research objective.

The study aimed to ensure accurate and reliable results by ensuring validity and reliability throughout the interviews, which are essential in any research (Middleton, 2019). To improve the research's validity and reliability, several measures were adopted. As Meier (2019) explains, validity is concerned with a measure's correctness, whereas reliability focuses on its consistency. Validity also ensures that the research findings are correct and pertinent and a fair representation of the studied phenomenon (Middleton, 2019).

To enhance validity, a thoughtful interview question guide targeting the research objectives was used to obtain thorough responses from specialists, aligning the obtained data with the research objectives. Regarding research findings, reliability refers to their continuity and stability throughout time, across several researchers, and various research contexts (Middleton, 2019). The study's research approach was outlined and continuously followed to increase reliability, incorporating a thorough interview process with explicit guidelines, and criteria for choosing relevant NGOs and participants. By adhering to standard procedures, this study is reproducible, yielding comparable results, thereby increasing the reliability of the findings.

Every interview was consistently conducted by the same researcher, following a standardised format to minimise potential discrepancies in data collection and interpretation, enhancing the research results' overall validity. Additional steps were taken to create a welcoming and trustworthy environment for participants during the interviews. Although online interviews presented some challenges, special attention was given to engaging in small talk before starting with the actual interview to foster a comfortable atmosphere.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Just as with any other research process, this research approach involved ethical considerations. Therefore, it was crucial to protect participants' rights and well-being while upholding high ethical standards throughout this study. Several ethical difficulties were identified and addressed during this research process. These ethical factors are covered in more detail in the following sections.

3.7.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent is essential in research, as it safeguards that people make informed decisions about whether to engage in a research study (National Human Genome Research Institute,

2022). Therefore, it has been ensured that all participants enter the interviews voluntarily after receiving full information about what it means for them to participate.

Before the interview, each participant received an information sheet via email (see Appendix A) explaining the study's objectives, their participation nature, and potential risks or advantages. Alongside the consent form, participants received all interview questions to allow careful consideration of their participation.

Participants had the chance to clarify uncertainties and ask questions before signing the consent form. All interviewees granted written consent, confirming their voluntary participation in the study (see Appendix B).

3.7.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

As all interviewed participants were working professionals, no need to hide their names was identified. However, personal information, such as telephone numbers and addresses, was kept anonymous to safeguard privacy and confidentiality.

Moreover, participants received guarantees that provided information would be used for this research only.

3.7.3 Ethical Guidelines and Committee

The research was conducted following the ethical standards established by the ethical committees of Griffith College. Before beginning this research, an ethical form has been filled out and shared with the committee, outlining the research procedure and objectives.

These principles offered a framework for carrying out research with human subjects, guaranteeing that the study was carried out morally and concerning the participant's rights and wellbeing. The committee reviewed and provided advice on any relevant ethical questions or considerations.

3.8 Limitations and Challenges

Overall, qualitative research also has its limitations. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative interview data and its inability to fully duplicate the settings, conditions, or interactions of each interview, it's risky to generalise study results beyond the investigated context (McLeod, 2023). Furthermore, McLeod (2023) warns that qualitative data analysis is challenging as its interpretation can be subjective.

The structured interview approach has significant advantages, but also downsides. Due to the fixed interview structure and the online interviews, there may be less rapport-building between the interviewer and participant potentially causing discomfort or nervousness that could affect responses (George and Merkus, 2022). However, interviewing professionals and creating a welcoming environment aimed to eliminate this issue.

Another disadvantage represents limited flexibility. Once the questions were chosen and used for one interview, they could not be changed or reduced without compromising the interview's quality (George and Merkus, 2022).

As all interviews were conducted online via Zoom, it required reliable internet connections and suitable technology for seamless video conferencing. Checking the Wi-Fi connection for stability before every interview helped to avoid audio and video disruptions to ensure smooth data collection. Another limitation is that two interviews were conducted in German, and the translation process may not always be 100% accurate, which could introduce potential discrepancies or loss of nuance in the data analysis and interpretation.

Coordinating international interviews created challenges due to time zone variations, especially for interviews conducted on the US West Coast with a nine-hour difference. However, with a few emails exchanged, suitable meeting times were scheduled successfully.

3.8.1 Sample Size Constraints

For the interviews, purposive sampling was employed to ensure information-richness and to observe this research concern from diverse perspectives (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger, 2020). Therefore, certain characteristics of participants were defined beforehand based on their availability and expertise.

For this research purpose, six NGOs have been selected that were known to be focused on MH among the target audience and/or SM usage. Two NGOs were interviewed from each country, namely Germany, Ireland, and the USA. While this sample size might seem small considering the number of relevant NGOs, qualitative research does not require an exact or predetermined sample size for accurate results according to research (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger, 2020).

3.8.2 Researcher Biases and Preconceived Notions

The study method and the impartiality of the conclusions can both be significantly impacted by researcher biases and preconceived assumptions. Therefore, it was essential to be conscious of personal biases and take steps to reduce their impact on the research (Jansen, 2022). During the interviews, self-awareness was practiced by continuously examining personal biases and seeking external input when needed to maintain objectivity.

Besides lessening moderator bias, the online approach reduced the possibility of prejudice arising from face-to-face interactions, body language, facial expressions, and voice tone (Onepoll, 2022).

3.8.3 Practical Considerations and Participant Availability

Practical issues and participant availability during the research procedure were crucial, especially considering the study's goal of conducting interviews with MH specialists working in different countries. Additionally, coordination and communication were essential to ask for participants' availability and secure their participation. A mutually agreeable timetable was established to ensure the participants could dedicate sufficient time to the interviews without compromising other commitments.

For participation, MH-focused NGOs in the USA, Ireland, and Germany were contacted. These countries not only represent diverse cultural backgrounds and societal norms, providing a broad perspective but also have significant SM penetration, making them relevant for studying SM influence on Gen Z's MH. Moreover, these countries have well-established MH initiatives and NGOs addressing MHC. Next, English is widely spoken and understood in all three countries, simplifying communication during the interviews. Lastly, respective countries are recognised for their advanced technological infrastructures, making Zoom interviews more accessible and feasible for data collection. Overall, the choice of Germany, the USA, and Ireland as research countries allowed for a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the complex relationship between SM and the MH of young adults in distinct cultural contexts.

4 Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

This chapter begins by presenting the insightful findings from the interviews with MHEs. Afterward, the chapter continues by comparing and discussing the results gathered from the literature review and the interviews.

Both findings combined offer a holistic understanding of the research objective regarding SM's impact on young individuals' MH and the extent of this issue's universality.

4.1 Interview Findings

As described in the methodology this research comprises six interviews with MHEs to explore and uncover first-hand insights.

4.1.1 Usage Patterns and Concerns

The interviews began by asking MHEs about their views on the most critical platforms for Gen Z. German and US MHEs identified TikTok as the most critical one, while the Irish MHEs primarily expressed main concerns regarding Instagram.

However, it's noteworthy that both, the US, and German MHEs acknowledged that each platform has its issues, with its impact depending more on the design features implemented rather than the platform itself.



Figure 3: Most critical SM platforms recognised by MHE per country.

Thus, each country named specific issues associated with the platform they considered most critical as illustrated in *Figure 2*. It's important to note, that all MHEs mentioned similar negative aspects of each platform, however, the following table highlights the most significant concerns from each country.

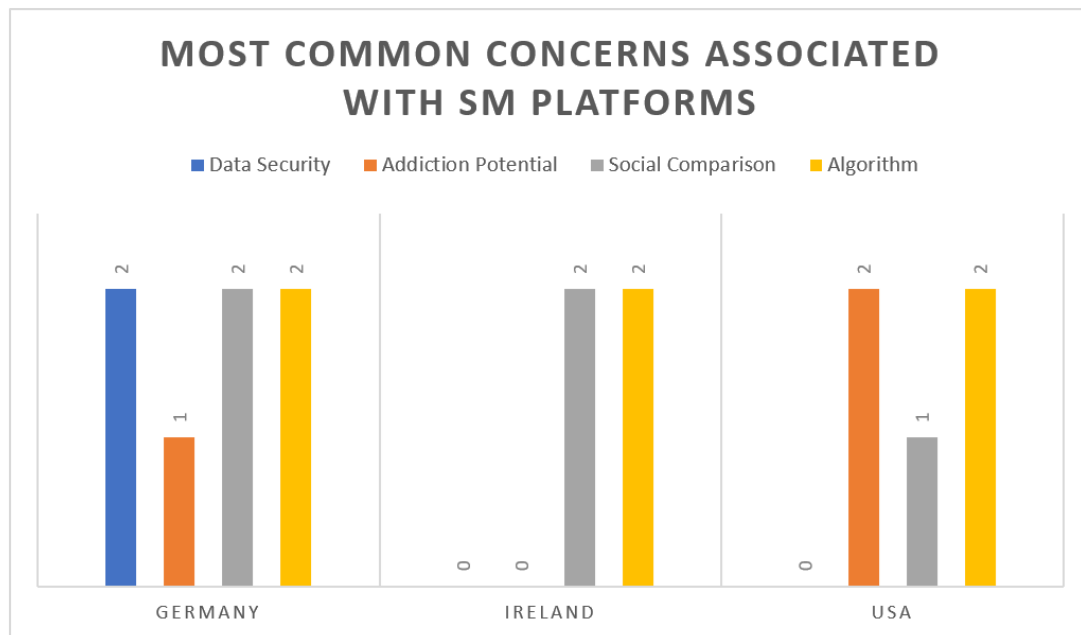


Figure 4: Most common concerns associated with SM platforms per country according to MHE.

Interestingly, the German MHEs expressed greater fear about TikTok's rise, particularly due to its non-compliance with EU data privacy laws, given its Chinese origin. The main concern centers on how the platform handles user data, encompassing its collection, storage, and sharing. Both US MHEs also identified TikTok as the most problematic one due to its suggested addiction potential of the customised feed that enables endless scrolling. While it's not a main concern, MHEs mentioned a shortened attention span caused by rapid information delivery as a negative side effect.

Conversely, the Irish MHEs were mostly worried about Instagram's image-centric nature. They suggest that the portrayal of the ideal life and the glorification of pictures contribute to increased exposure to body ideals, leading to body dissatisfaction among young adults. Another hazard Irish MHEs witnessed is that young adults' lives become virtual, lacking organic experiences and a balanced lifestyle, which is equally harmful as pursuing the perfect body.

A shared worry among MHEs was the algorithm, which adds to its addiction potential due to its ability to quickly discern users' moods and emotions. This enables it to serve content that not only presumably aligns with the user's interest but also their current emotional state, which has been proven to negatively impact an individual's psychological state.

While Kleemann assumes that SM does not directly cause psychological disorders, other MHEs agreed that the algorithm can worsen one's state of mind due to the looping effect.

Subsequently, MHEs were questioned regarding the average number of hours they observed Gen Z spending on SM versus the maximum duration they would recommend for Gen Z to engage with SM, as represented in *Figure 3*. The interviews revealed varying perspectives on the average hours of SM use among Gen Z. While Kleemann and Nunez witnessed Gen Z typically spending 2-3 hours on SM daily, expressing discomfort about excessive usage, Walsh-Healy, and Flynn observed many young individuals in Ireland spending over 5 hours a day online, which she finds alarming. Next, Stolz, who works with addicted media users in Germany, reported that young adults spend an average of 7-12 hours daily on all media combined, while Higgins experienced an average of over 8 hours of SM use among Gen Z daily in the USA.

In terms of recommended time limits for SM, the answers were again vague and inconsistent. While Kleemann claims that 30 minutes a day might contribute to more happiness, Stolz identifies anything over 4 hours is worrying and leans toward addiction. Higgins expressed concerns when non-educational content exceeds 1.5-4 hours per day. On the other side, Walsh-Healy believed over 1.5 to 2 hours a day is excessive use. She compares it to reading a magazine and suggests that the more time individuals spend consuming ‘perfect pictures’ on SM the more potential harm it can cause. Flynn agrees and states that everything over 2 hours daily is linked to higher levels of depression, body image, and anxiety.

Nunez perceived it as a complex question, emphasising the importance of considering how SM usage led individuals to neglect aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, he suggested that spending more than 6 hours on SM could result in media misuse.

The interviews indicate that the ideal amount of time remains subjective as it

heavily depends on SM’s main purpose and external circumstances, such as a pandemic or going through significant transitions in life, such as starting university.

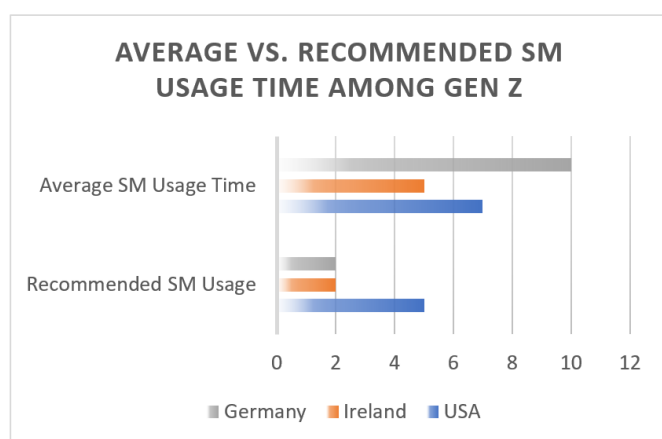


Figure 5: Average vs. recommended SM Usage time per day in hours among Gen Z according to interviewed MHEs.

Interestingly, Ireland and Germany recommend a maximum of 2 hours of SM usage a day, while US recommendations are far beyond it.

Therefore, the US appears to have more relaxed guidelines, allowing for greater SM usage beyond the 2-hour limit. This discrepancy may reflect varying perspectives on the potential risks and benefits of extended SM engagement and could be influenced by cultural, social, or scientific factors in each country.

The common factor across all countries is the substantial difference between the suggested and recommended usage time for Gen Z, raising global concerns about SM misuse.

This gap highlights the potential risks associated with SM usage and suggests that individuals should be proactive in monitoring and restricting their time to these platforms to promote better MH.

4.1.2 Vulnerable Groups and Risk Factors

MHEs confirm that certain groups are more prone to the impacts of SM than others, as demonstrated in *Figure 4*. Notably, teenagers below 18 are commonly considered the highest-risk group for SM content according to MHEs. Kleemann suggests that younger individuals have less consolidated self-esteem and are more vulnerable to negative impacts of SM, such as negative self-perception, feelings of sadness, and anxiety. Walsh-Healy proposes that younger teenagers may lack the maturity to regulate their SM consumption effectively and Flynn associates this age segment as most critical for the development of body image concerns.

Nevertheless, Walsh-Healy also recognises the negative effects SM can have on individuals in their early to mid-20s. Since this generation grew up with SM, she believes that the actual damage occurs before that age, and they could already be experiencing negative effects. While Higgins and Stolz agree that 10-18 years old are most vulnerable to SM content, they remind to not underestimate the influence of SM on students and individuals in their 20s. During such times, many young adults tend to seek comfort and distraction from real-world problems by engaging with SM platforms.

Additionally, girls have been identified as a critical demographic by all MHEs. Kleemann indicates that girls are particularly susceptible due to pressure to conform to societal beauty standards perpetuated by SM. Walsh-Healy implies that girls are more vulnerable through the influence of perfection shown on SM, while males seem to struggle most with online bullying. Remarkably, both Irish MHEs observed the male demographic as equally affected in Ireland. MHEs named the following reasons for it, including the prevalence of Fitspo content that promotes unrealistic standards and body ideals, affecting young males' self-image. Second, males tend to be less likely to report cyberbullying or negative experiences, which can have

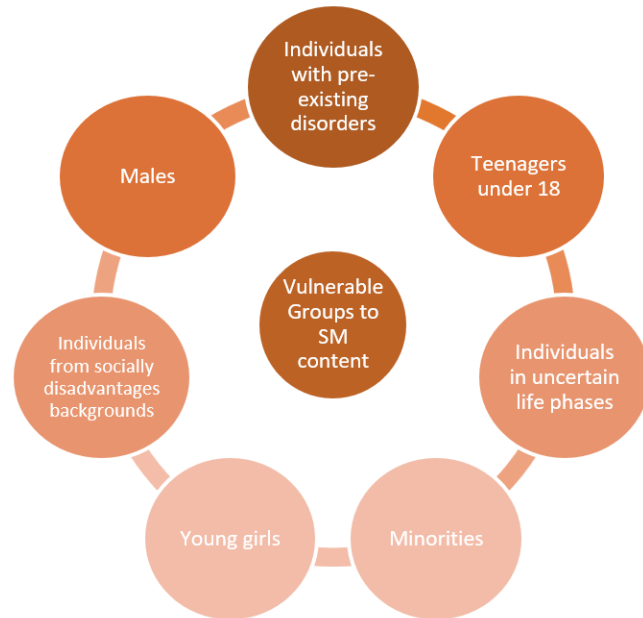


Figure 6: MHEs identified groups proven to have an increased vulnerability to SM content. detrimental effects on MH.

Both German and US MHEs expressed increased worries about minority groups. The concerns raised by both regarding the impact of SM on minority groups highlight a critical area of vulnerability within the realm of online interactions.

Nunez points out that some ethnic groups, especially Latino and African American individuals, tend to be more vulnerable to negative SM influences. This emphasis underscores the potential disparities in experiences and the unique challenges they may face in the digital landscape. Kleemann and Walsh-Healy further assume that younger people, particularly those with unstable support systems or from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, face higher vulnerability to negative influences on SM. Nunez experienced that the same applies to children from lower-income families who tend to spend more time on SM.

Overall, Kleemann claims that strong self-worth and self-esteem can help mitigate the negative effects of SM, but those with pre-existing disorders may be at increased risk.

4.1.3 Harmful Content

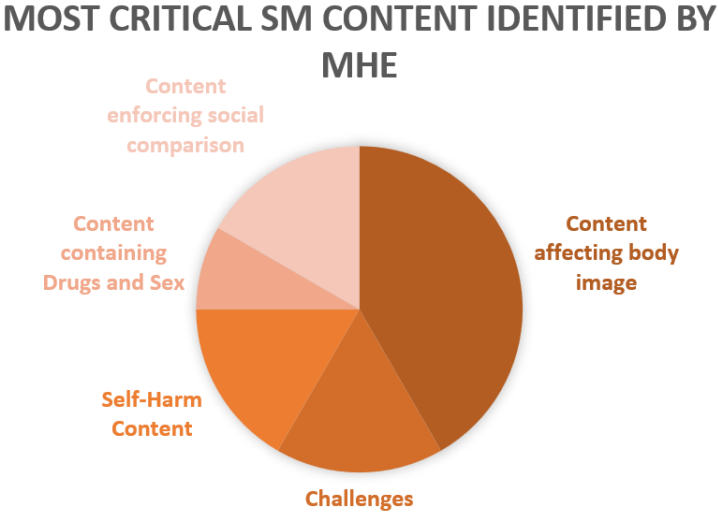


Figure 7: Most critical SM content identified by MHEs.

As illustrated in *Figure 5*, the interviews identified certain SM content as most critical for young adults. First, Kleemann and Nunez emphasise that the danger of SM content is subjective and varies for everyone and therefore any content causing stress or negative feelings should be considered harmful. Nevertheless, other MHEs criticise content that affects one’s body image. Specifically, two types of content stood out as particularly concerning among all: Fitspo and beauty content. Both categories were found to have significant negative effects on females and males alike.

Walsh-Healy mentions that it tends to lead people to strive for the perfect body which can be very harmful and contributes to an unbalanced life. Stolz adds that idealised images enhanced by filters, nutrition, and ‘healthy lifestyle’ content can be critical to one’s self-esteem. According to Nunez, this equally applies to males and identifies Fitspo content as highly critical, as it can transmit a wrong perception of body goals and dieting. Body whys manager Flynn, who’s specialised in eating disorders among youth, categorises any content promoting thinness or muscularity concerning fitness as extremely harmful, expressing concerns about the rise of fitness influencers. She also mentioned that while body image issues used to be primarily associated with females, it nowadays equally applies to males, referring to a rapid increase in body image concerns in males of all ages in recent times.

Overall, Kleemann and Nunez express significant concern about content encouraging social comparison, as it has been shown to trigger feelings of inadequacy, FOMO, and dissatisfaction.

For instance, a mentioned example represents someone feeling content after getting ice cream with friends on the weekend, only to experience a sudden drop in happiness upon seeing someone renting a luxurious property in Spain. This highlights the detrimental impact of comparing one's life to others on SM platforms.

Moreover, MHEs categorize risky TikTok challenges as another issue, particularly due to the induced heightened peer pressure, especially among males. Additionally, other harmful trends, including hate speech, sex, or drugs have been categorised as harmful. The Irish MHE in particular express concerns about the widespread of self-harm content, as it can inspire others to do the same. Overall, MHEs criticise activities that exert peer pressure to conduct dangerous things. To conclude, this content can pose significant risks to young adults' MH and underscore the importance of addressing it on SM.

4.1.4 Gen Z, Mental Health, and SM

The insights from MHEs interviews provide observations on frequent MHC among Gen Z that potentially correlate with SM usage, as illustrated in *Figure 6*.

Generally, MHEs noted a significant increase in MHC among Gen Zs in their respective countries. The interviews suggest that anxiety, depression, and body dysmorphia are equally common in each country. Walsh-Healy connects the escalation of anxiety among Gen Z in Ireland to various factors such as the climate crisis, pandemic, and wars. However, she highlights that the constant exposure to bad news via devices, especially phones, contributes to heightened anxiety levels. She further explains anxiety as something which is originally a natural response to protect oneself from harm, becoming constant for young individuals, and affecting their ability to function properly and cope with normal situations.

While MHEs agreed that these issues existed before SM and that SM is not solely to blame, all of them suggest a correlation between SM and the worsened state of MH. Furthermore, Stolz indicates ADHD, borderline personality disorder, and anxiety as MHC related to SM use. Walsh-Healy highlighted social isolation as a common issue, and the blurring lines between reality and SM have been observed to lead to negative impacts on self-worth, feelings of inadequacy, and anxiety. Additionally, Irish MHEs noticed an increase in self-harm videos, potentially becoming reinforced by the algorithm.

Nunez also pointed out that certain stressors arising from SM, such as online bullying, and the urge to stay connected can cause and worsen anxiety, whereas the constant social comparison has been widely linked to depression symptoms.

One aspect that MHEs specifically emphasised is the role of social comparison in contributing to MHC. MHEs agreed that the constant comparison with others on SM can negatively impact self-esteem, reduces self-worth, and create a feeling of inadequacy. Kleemann observed social behaviour, anxiety disorders, and depression to be common among Gen Z in Germany due to the pervasive social comparison of SM. Additionally, the addiction potential of SM platforms, especially due to features including endless scrolling, particularly in vulnerable individuals is a growing common concern among MHEs. Moreover, MHEs stated that the never-ending aspect of tailored content, potentially entailing content that triggers MHC, is especially problematic for individuals already struggling with MHC, such as anxiety, depression, or addiction.

MHEs further warn that endless scrolling leads to decreased attention span, and exposure to various emotional content in a short period can cause emotional numbness. The algorithm plays a vital role in shaping a person's SM experience based on the content they consume, which can further exacerbate addiction-like behaviours. Consequently, MHEs highlight that individuals must be conscious of their online behaviour and seek support to manage and limit excessive SM usage. Nevertheless, specific steps for young adults to achieve this consciousness have not been mentioned.

Furthermore, MHEs pointed out that SM usage patterns can be influenced by external factors. The trend of working from home, which has become more prevalent due to the pandemic, has presumably led to challenges in concentration and increased feelings of loneliness, making Gen Z more prone to the distraction of SM according to Stolz.

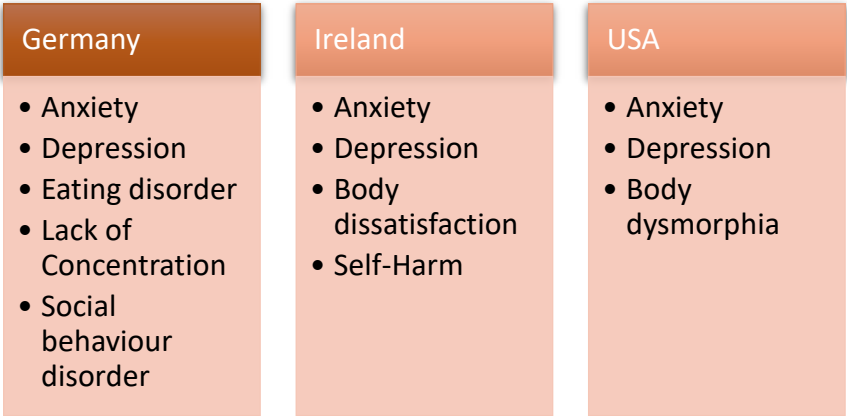


Figure 8: Most common MHC among Gen Z identified by MHEs.

4.1.5 Positive Aspects of SM

However, MHEs also highlight the positive impacts of SM that should not be ignored. Nunez emphasises the positive impact on social connectedness particularly for those who feel isolated or not heard in the real-world and can especially benefit minorities and activism groups in finding allies.

Walsh-Healy insists that it can be used efficiently to promote MH and offer support, as there is much content on MHC, prevention, and assistance. Kleemann also reminds that SM is not inherently negative and highlights its positive impacts. Community support, recognition, and MH resources have been identified as positive outcomes by all.

MHEs agreed that it also helps individuals feeling depressed or dealing with mental illness to find immense support and realise they are not alone. Higgins further believes that SM can be beneficial if used correctly, as it allows for seeking help anonymously.

Besides, it represents an efficient way to reach the younger generation nowadays. Therefore, the key seems to be able to recognise and utilise the positive aspects while reducing the risks.

4.1.6 Improving Platform Health

MHEs were asked what SM platforms itself could do to create a healthier environment for its users. Despite slightly different concerns, MHEs required similar measurements.

As the algorithm has been identified as the most harmful by everyone, MHEs call for more responsibility for displayed content among platforms, especially to safeguard vulnerable populations. To increase accountability for posted content Stolz suggests implementing video authentication during sign-up to control age-wise access to platforms while also recognising that it could easily be bypassed. Walsh-Healy suggests that platforms should strive for balance, by disseminating more healthy posts to encounter damaging ones.

It has also been commonly suggested to involve MH professionals in SM companies to create an ethical committee to be able to make more ethical decisions. These professionals could help to point out critical design features and help to create them safer overall. Nunez highlights that it could help SM to reconsider its design features, specifically the location-sharing one and the option for public accounts. Designing those features safer would drastically increase its healthiness and reduce safety lacks.

Overall, MHEs believe that it would be efficient to implement notifications directly within the platforms. As it's mutually agreed that platforms must embrace more authenticity, the idea to label filtered posts to help users differentiate between reality and altered content to reduce the pursuit of perfection has been proposed multiple times. This visual reminder would also emphasise that SM shows reels and not real life, enabling users to approach the content with a critical mindset.

Instagram and TikTok are widely criticised for their never-ending content suggestions enabled by the algorithm. To act against addictive behaviour patterns, notifications that nudge users when a certain time limit is reached could be useful to promote a more conscious online behaviour. Additionally, notification when sensitive or harmful content is consumed could limit the exposure to e.g., self-harm videos according to Wealsh-Healy.

4.1.7 Role of Government

MHEs emphasised the importance of individuals knowing how to handle SM properly from an early age. It has been further suggested that media literacy should be mandatory introduced in secondary education.

Furthermore, Kleemann suggests implementing age restrictions and identity verification on SM platforms for user safety, a view supported by all.

As especially the German MHEs are concerned about data issues, he recommends banning apps from countries non-compliant with EU directives and suggests storing data on local servers for better control and compliance within the country. Furthermore, he proposes introducing school, health, and safety laws to regulate device usage in educational and work settings.

Walsh-Healy and Nunez also advocate for government intervention, viewing SM as a societal issue and not solely a parent's responsibility. They further call for legislation to monitor online consumption, and automated controls by manufacturers to protect vulnerable individuals.

4.1.8 Prevention and Education

All MHEs stress the significance of media competence education as a mandatory subject in school and highlight the necessity of education and awareness to foster a healthier relationship with SM from an early age.

They find that this would empower young adults to develop critical thinking skills and make informed decisions about their SM usage. Nevertheless, a healthy relationship with SM must also be enhanced at home, requiring clear rules and guidelines at home, along with teaching the ability to endure boredom to foster healthier relationships with SM. Therefore, MHEs claim the importance of raising awareness among parents, e.g., through school event evenings, enabling them to better observe, understand, and educate their children on this concern.

By equipping young adults with media literacy skills, it becomes possible to navigate the online world responsibly and minimise potential harm. Walsh-Healy emphasises the importance of more awareness and education, involving guardians, parents, and teachers. Nunez supports this and adds that it would be beneficial to provide families with training and conversation to ensure a healthy balance in digital use for their children from an early age.

Encouraging young individuals to consume content responsibly and maintain a positive mindset despite the negativity on SM is key according to MHEs. Walsh-Healy advises young individuals to focus on quality over quantity in terms of their SM followers. She encourages them to not chase followers and emphasises the importance of self-worth.

Thus, Stolz encourages young adults to utilise support groups, despite their negative associations. These groups can help individuals find like-minded friends, reducing the need for SM to compensate for loneliness. Engaging in open discussions fosters connections and a sense of belonging, providing a healthier approach to social interactions.

All suggested improvement and/or prevention strategies of each country are illustrated in *Figure 7*.

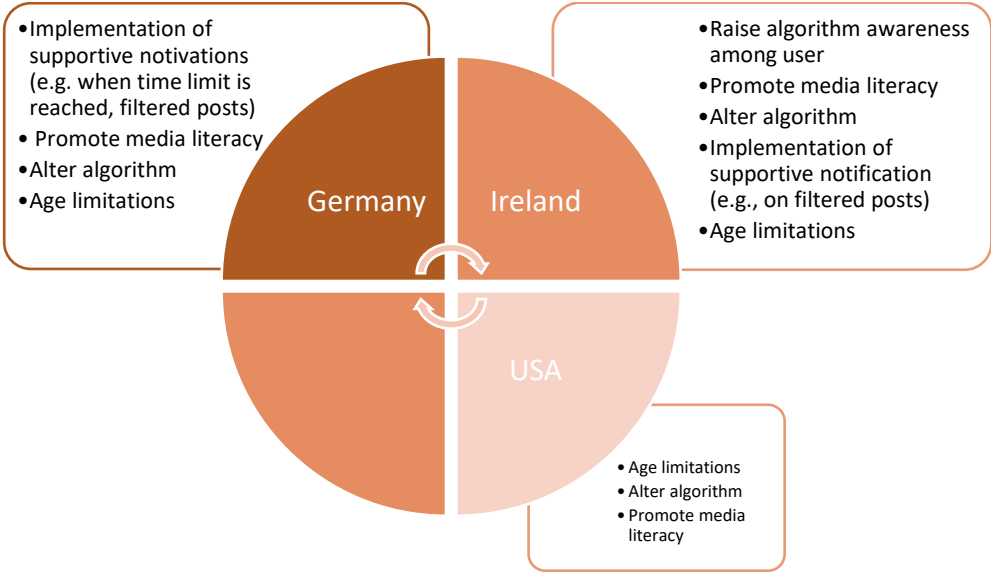


Figure 9: Suggested strategies for a healthier SM according to MHEs per country

4.2 Analysis

In the following analysis, the primary interview findings will be examined alongside the results obtained from the literature review. The goal is to identify common trends among Ireland, Germany, and the USA and potential disparities of SM's impact on young adults.

As previously indicated in the list of abbreviations, 'MHE' specifically refers to mental health experts interviewed from NGOs, while 'literature' refers to the reviewed academic sources during the literature review.

4.2.1 Unravelling the Impact of SM on young adults' mental health

A shared concern uncovered in the literature research is the high rates of MHC among Gen Z, which MHEs confirmed to be a universal phenomenon. However, the literature review and MHEs interviews uncovered that the relationship between SM and potential negative MHC consequences is highly complex.

Thus, several factors were revealed that were mentioned to potentially influence SM's impact on young adults' MH. By comparing interview and literature findings, those variables will be explored in the following. First, personal usage patterns proved to have a significant influence on SM's impact. MHEs further identified personal usage patterns including excessive usage, passive vs active usage, and whether the individual belongs to a vulnerable group as indicators to assess potential harm caused by SM.

It's suggested that the type of platform plays a significant role, which will also be unravelled. It has been further highlighted that some design features implemented in a platform can be more harmful than others and that the extent of harm significantly depends on implemented design features. Therefore, those features will be explored in detail in the next sections.

4.2.2 Usage Patterns

4.2.2.1 Excessive Usage

Excessive SM use was exposed to be a complex issue, and the literature review and interview findings revealed the complexity of defining and evaluating it as an addiction. First, MHEs and literature review revealed a significant increase in SM usage within the last century, due to the emerging rise of SM platforms.

The literature review stated that the average user spends 2 hours and 24 minutes on SM, while data from MHEs revealed radically higher average usage time. According to MHEs observations, users in Germany use SM around 8 hours a day, followed by 7 hours in the USA,

and 5 hours in Ireland. Nevertheless, MHEs responses were vague and inconsistent, partly even among experts from the same country. This emphasises the lack of measurements to capture such statistics accurately.

Another striking observation emerging from the interviews is the significant variance in SM usage recommendations among different countries. Ireland and Germany both advocate for a maximum of 2 hours of daily SM usage, reflecting a cautious approach towards SM usage and indicating a concern for the potential adverse effects on MH. Furthermore, limiting screen time to 2 hours daily aligns with the guidelines set by reputable health organisations, aiming to strike a balance between the benefits and risks of SM use. Nevertheless, measurements to reduce such screen time are still open for discussion.

On the other hand, the US recommendations, which exceed the 2-hour limit, may indicate a more permissive approach towards SM usage. Since MHEs noticed that SM has become deeply embedded in the daily lives of many Americans, setting a stricter time limit might be perceived as impractical or overly restrictive.

While the precise implications of these varying recommendations require further research and analysis, MHE Nunez justifies it by acknowledging the complexity of measuring SM use among young adults, as it can vary depending on factors such as the pandemic influence and usage purpose. MHE Kleemann argues that individuals using SM extensively for professional reasons, like Influencers, may not be accurately captured in the statistics. The complexity of measuring excessive usage is also supported by literature with some studies suggesting that SM use can lead to addictive behaviour, while others argued that there's a lack of official criteria to measure SM addiction. Overall, these findings highlight the complexities of understanding how young adults use SM to be able to comprehend to what extent extensive usage can be harmful.

Besides the lack of definition, MHEs suggest that excessive use occurs when SM contributes to neglecting real-world responsibilities such as work, school, and social interactions and warn that this process happens gradually and often unconsciously, creating it challenging for individuals to recognise the negative impact it has on their lives. Overall, findings suggest that excessive usage is more linked to an individual's purpose and psychological state, not just time spent. The purpose-driven aspect of excessive SM use highlights the need for a nuanced approach when addressing this issue.

Following the findings, it can be concluded that rather than solely focusing on the number of hours spent on SM, the underlying reasons for such usage patterns deserve consideration.

Consequently, individuals using SM excessively for non-educational purposes such as mindless scrolling or seeking validation may be more prone to developing problematic behaviours according to interview findings. Conversely, individuals using SM responsibly for productive purposes, such as networking or promoting MH awareness, may experience fewer negative impacts.

4.2.2.2 Active vs. Passive Usage

Surprisingly, the literature assumes that passive consumption of SM content is associated with negative MH outcomes, while active engagement has been shown to positively impact mental well-being. While one could assume that active engagement with SM is more harmful, the literature explains that active engagement allows self-expression and presentation, with both, have been linked to positively influence mental well-being. All MHEs agree and claim that networking and self-expression via photos, videos, or status updates have been found to positively influence MH, as further explained in 2.4. Furthermore, according to the literature, the ability to control one's image has been connected to positive MH outcomes.

On the other hand, passive usage has been described as mindlessly scrolling through the news feed by observing others enjoying their lives.

Additionally, factors like seeking social connection, finding support, or using SM as a creative outlet are suggested to have a more positive outcome on well-being than passively scrolling through the feed without interaction. Thus, Nunez advocates for a balanced usage between consuming, creating, and engaging in content.

4.2.3 Vulnerable Groups

The findings from both literature and interviews uncovered that some groups are more vulnerable to SM content than others and need to be more protected from potential negative SM content. While it cannot be generalised, the following groups have been identified as most vulnerable to SM:

4.2.3.1 Teenagers and Girls

MHEs confirmed that teenagers, particularly teenage girls are most vulnerable, as MHEs noticed that their self-esteem is not fully developed yet to navigate the SM landscape safely.

Moreover, girls and young teenagers have been identified to be most vulnerable to visual SM content as it can negatively affect their self-perception and own body image.

4.2.3.2 Individuals with Unstable support systems, Disadvantaged Backgrounds, and Uncertain Life Phases

Moreover, MHEs witnessed that individuals with unstable support systems, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and/or during uncertain life phases through either personal or outside circumstances, such as a pandemic, make individuals more vulnerable to SM content and excessive usage.

Most MHEs suggest that this vulnerability could be attributed to various factors, such as seeking validation or connections through online platforms due to limited offline support. This further underlines the possible association between socio-economic status and online engagement. Additionally, it proposes that SM might serve as an accessible and affordable means of entertainment and interaction for this demographic.

4.2.3.3 Minorities

The German and US MHEs express particular concern for minority groups, such as some ethnic groups or LGBTQ+ members, indicating the significance of SM's source of companionship and emotional connection for those who may not have strong networks in real life.

These findings indicate that SM can be a valuable support system, particularly for those lacking real-life contacts. Furthermore, it can empower minorities to express themselves freely. MHEs emphasises fostering self-esteem, providing guidance to young adults, and building resilience to reduce excessive reliance on SM.

4.2.3.4 Males

Especially, the Irish MHEs expressed an increased concern for males, due to the rising Fitspo and challenges content, which will be elaborated on in the following.

4.2.4 Platforms

Remarkably, the literature and MHEs collectively agreed that Instagram and TikTok can pose significant risks to young adults' MH. As literature underlined the increasing popularity of visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok among Gen Z reflects not only the changing digital landscape but also the generations' preferences. The ease of creating and consuming visually appealing content has contributed to the widespread adoption of these platforms by young adults.

However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the perceived harmful impacts of these platforms vary based on the country. In both, Germany, and the USA, MHEs identified TikTok as the most critical platform, but for distinct reasons.

According to Irish MHEs, Instagram was identified as the most harmful platform in Ireland, mainly due to its image-centric nature. However, the findings also highlighted certain design features implemented within the platforms that play a crucial role in shaping the overall platform's impact. Therefore, this section will uncover the most significant aspects discovered in the literature review and interviews.

4.2.4.1 Privacy Issues

German MHEs mentioned TikTok as the most concerning platform due to its privacy issues. These concerns align with the German author and lecturer Montag, who also highlighted data privacy as a major concern in his literature. Due to its Chinese origin, the platform does not align with common EU laws, in terms of its user data collection and storage. The literature review confirmed this and raised concerns, particularly about minors who often use their bedroom to film videos.

Nevertheless, while Instagram has stricter rules, US MHE Nunez criticised its option for public accounts. While it can direct more traffic to one's account, it can represent a danger, especially for young girls as anybody on the platform cannot only view their pictures but also contact them. Another critical feature in terms of privacy, is the location-sharing option on Instagram. With this option, anybody in the follower list can view someone's current location, which can be dangerous to young adults, particularly girls.

4.2.4.2 Algorithms'

Conversely, the US MHEs did not specifically mention data privacy as a concern but classified the addictive nature of TikTok's endless scrolling option as the most problematic one. Moreover, the MHEs and literature acknowledged the algorithm's role in intensifying the adverse effects of SM on MH. Originally intended as a marketing tool for micro-targeting users, TikTok and Instagram's algorithms have evolved to tailor content to users' preferences, making it challenging to disengage from platforms.

Endless scrolling, driven by algorithm-designed content tailored to users' preferences has raised global fear as confirmed during the MHEs interviews and literature examination.

First, MHEs observed that it heightens the addictive potential of SM, as it keeps individuals engaged for prolonged periods, intensifying the risks of MHC. The literature revealed that since SM represents a source of income many businesses' platforms are continually seeking to enhance user engagement, encourage longer sessions, and keep users immersed in their content. This constant exposure to emotional content in a short span, cannot only lead to emotional numbness but also contributes to the decrease in attention span among Gen Z as suggested by MHE Stolz, who specialised in working with media-addicted young adults.

Nevertheless, MHEs raised the largest concern about users with depressive symptoms or even suicidal thoughts, as the algorithm often suggests content that can exacerbate their mental state. Similarly, individuals with eating disorders face similar challenges, where the algorithm can further trigger harmful behaviours when it detects the user's interest in content related to e.g., dieting tips. Findings further suggest that it can create an echo chamber of negative emotions, making it more challenging for individuals to seek help or find uplifting content. The algorithms' ability to keep users engaged with content that identifies their struggles can intensify MHC and contribute to an endless loop.

Therefore, MHEs advocate for SM companies to assume greater responsibility for the potential harm caused by their algorithms and reduce harmful content on their platforms. However, implementing this approach presents challenges in terms of requiring a substantial workforce and facing issues related to subjectivity and scalability.

4.2.5 Influencer and Self-Presentation

4.2.5.1 Influencer

Literature demonstrated that Instagram and TikTok represent the most efficient platforms to reach Gen Z and therefore became increasingly important for businesses. Consequently, people with many followers strive to be influencers and use such platforms as a source of income.

Literature emphasised that theoretically everybody with more likes can become an influencer, thus both platforms are criticised to foster a 'chasing the like' behaviour.

Contrary to negative perceptions, it has also been found that influencers can positively impact young adults by boosting self-confidence when discussing sensitive topics, and inspiring career decisions. MHE Flynn recognised that famous influencer often reflects the ideal, further spreading the body ideal and potentially contributing to body dissatisfaction among their users. Therefore, users' idealisation of influencers as role models can pose dangers, leading to unrealistic comparisons and potential feelings of inadequacy.

The interviews suggest that influencers should promote authenticity and MH to foster a healthier SM environment. However, achieving this goal can be challenging due to the existing social pressure to present idealised images among platforms. Consequently, influencers may face the risk of losing followers when they engage in more authentic and vulnerable posts.

Nevertheless, MHEs criticise the strong attachment to influencers some users have, leading to a significant influence on users' choices and behaviour. Consequently, content creators (influencers) with a significant following among young adults should be mindful of the potential consequences of promoting unrealistic beauty or fitness standards. Though, it would first require influencers to be aware of this issue, which could be difficult to implement.

4.2.5.2 Self-Presentation

Research has shown that visual platforms increase shifted the focus away from pure communication and social maintenance. For many Gen Z's, using SM seems now to be more about creating a supposed social standing or pretending to have one. Thus, seeking approval and acceptance from others appears to become a priority.

MHEs suggest this to be unhealthy particularly for young girls, as this behaviour promotes the pressure of uploading the perfect picture. Filters and other editing programs have become the norm and are exemplified by influencers and stars like Kim Kardashian. Consequently,

Instagram and TikTok illustrate a world full of idealised pictures and life scenarios, enhancing social pressure and negatively impacting their self-esteem, as it leaves many people wondering because their life is not as 'flawless'.

Visual platforms attracted many individuals to showcase intimate aspects of their lives, including vacations, fitness accomplishments, and professional achievements, to a large community as emphasised by literature. However, a significant issue highlighted through literature and interviews is the compulsion some could feel to portray their lives better than it is to keep up with others. This phenomenon is further intensified by modern technology and the abundance of tools such as filters that allow for photo enhancements. Especially Instagram's emphasis on idealised self-presentation, visual content, and beauty standards has often been linked to negative impacts on body image and self-esteem by interviews and literature findings.

Unfortunately, not everyone is able to detect that the pictures do not correspond with reality. This represents a significant issue, as MHEs and interview findings indicate that particularly girls strive to attain these unrealistic standards sets by edited photos. Thus, research suggests that the pressure to conform to these idealised portrayals can have detrimental effects on their MH and body image.

4.2.6 The Dangers of Fitspo, Beauty, and other Content

The literature review and interviews demonstrated that some content can be more harmful than others. Particularly beauty and Fitspo (Fitness Inspiration) content has been indicated as critical by literature and MHEs. The fact that this content type was equally emphasised by MHEs from respective countries underscored its global impact.

It's proposed that beauty content, often showcasing idealised and edited images, can perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction. For young adults, especially females, who are still developing their self-esteem and body image, MHEs noted that exposure to such content can have a profound negative impact on their MH. Consequently, the constant comparison to flawless and curated images may result in self-criticism and a distorted perception of one's appearance. These findings raise the question of how to effectively address the filtered online environment, which seems to become a norm.

While females have been widely mentioned as the most problematic user base, the male demographic is not spared. For instance, Fitspo content, which focuses on fitness, exercise routines, and body transformation, portrayed a similar detrimental effect on individuals' self-perception, particularly young males as highlighted specifically by Irish MHEs. Since it often promotes intense workouts and restrictive dieting, it can encourage unhealthy behaviours and an unhealthy preoccupation with achieving an unrealistic physique. For individuals vulnerable to body image issues and disordered eating, such content can exacerbate existing struggles and contribute to the development of harmful habits.

Furthermore, this content can contribute to the phenomenon of 'social comparison', wherein individuals measure their worth based on how they perceive themselves relative to others. The curated and idealised nature of such content can lead young adults to believe that their lives or bodies are inadequate compared to others, fostering feelings of isolation and anxiety, especially among those already susceptible to MHC. Moreover, MHEs highlight that comparing one's life to the seemingly idealised portrayals of others on SM can negatively affect self-esteem and perception.

However, the persistence of harmful content being displayed on SM platforms highlights a lack of sufficient accountability on the part of SM companies. Consequently, MHEs urgently demand that such companies take responsibility for displaying healthy content, particularly when their algorithms detect the consumption of unhealthy content. An identified concern here is how SM companies will become aware of the need for greater accountability. One potential alternative approach involves integrating MHEs within SM companies. Nevertheless, it's crucial to address the realistic challenges and potential limitations of implementing such a strategy on a global scale.

Additionally, challenges, especially popular among TikTok represent a common danger. Especially in the US, often dangerous challenges become the norm on platforms and especially young males try to prove themselves through them. Moreover, males are less likely to report cyberbullying or online harassment, which not only results in fewer official stats but also enhances the dangers for this demographic.

To conclude, the negative impact of this content uncovered by the findings, underscored the need for responsible content creation and consumption but at the same time, it demands an efficient strategy as to how this could be implemented for young adults.

4.2.7 Community Support

It has been indicated that SM offers significant benefits that have been praised by literature and MHEs alike. One notable advantage is its ability to foster a sense of community support and connectedness among young individuals.

As illustrated in the interviews, in the past, individuals facing personal challenges or MHC often relied solely on their immediate environment for support. However, this global reach enables them to find like-minded individuals who may be going through similar experiences, even if located in different parts of the world. Literature findings align with this and claim that SM's power to create virtual communities where people can share their struggles, experiences, and triumphs has proven to be a game-changer for many young adults. It provides them with a platform to voice their thoughts and emotions, knowing that others can relate and empathise. This sense of solidarity and understanding can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, which are common challenges faced by Gen Z in an increasingly digital and fast-paced world.

Findings also showed that SM offers numerous online support groups, forums, and communities dedicated to various topics, such as MH, body positivity, LGBTQ+ issues, and more. MHEs observed that these became safe spaces for minorities, where individuals can freely express themselves without fear of judgment, leading to increased self-acceptance and a stronger sense of belonging. Therefore, many young adults turn to SM in times of crisis or uncertainty, as seen during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the prevalence of online connections also presents challenges. Literature indicates that Gen Z's lives have become increasingly centered around the online sphere, with the added pressure of constant online presence intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, there's a risk identified in prioritising virtual friendships over real-life relationships. The findings demonstrate that excessive SM use can lead to a decline in face-to-face interactions, potentially resulting in feelings of isolation and disconnection from the offline world.

4.2.8 Social Media's Role in FOMO

As uncovered in the literature review, users utilise SM to share photos and videos of their vacations, parties, and other positive life events which were proven to intensify FOMO. As users see their peer's enjoying life and having what appears to be a better time than them, it can create feelings of envy, loneliness, and inadequacy. Consequently, it can lead to a constant need to check the platforms and stay updated to avoid feeling left out, fostering not only excessive SM usage but also leading to dissatisfaction and the development of depressive symptoms.

MHEs interviews strongly suggest both platform's algorithms play a role in fostering social comparison, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and FOMO among Gen Z. According to the literature, the algorithm shows content that aligns with users' preferences, they may only see posts that evoke feelings of missing out, making the fear even more pronounced.

In other words, the proven heightened anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and even depression can be attributed to the constant comparison and feelings of inadequacy caused by continuous exposure to other pictures and videos. Moreover, the pressure to create an appealing online presence and project an idealised image of oneself can also be emotionally draining, further contributing to MHC.

4.2.9 Cross-Country Recommendations to improve SM Usage

Findings from all sources confirmed that addressing this issue demands a multifaceted approach. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that SM usage should be recognised as a societal concern, necessitating the involvement of all stakeholders.

Ultimately, a collaborative effort involving SNS, regulatory authorities, MH professionals, and users themselves is necessary to effectively tackle the dangerous aspects of SM, as elaborated on in the following.

4.2.9.1 Improving Platforms

MHEs require more accountability from SM companies to take responsibility for their displayed content and request a more outbalanced environment on SM platforms globally.

To ensure more responsible content, MHEs urge SM companies to involve professional health experts. By having an ethical committee, MHEs suggest that design features would be created in a way that promotes MH. Its noteworthy, that the term 'ethical committee' lacks some clarification as the interviews did not specify what the committee's purpose, composition, and

responsibilities would be. It further must be clarified if they should solely focus on health-related issues or address broader ethical concerns.

As the algorithm has been detected as the most problematic feature, MHEs propose utilising the algorithm on Instagram and TikTok for positive purposes. This involves detecting users consuming substantial unhealthy content and consequently displaying more healthy content to limit its negative effects. However, MHEs did not provide a clear definition of 'unhealthy content'.

Overall, greater user awareness is necessary. MHEs recommend implementing notification within the platform itself to encourage a more conscious SM behaviour. Notifications on filtered posts, exceeding time limits, or consuming sensitive content can remind young adults that the content may not reflect reality. While it's important to acknowledge that users can easily bypass notifications by clicking them away, potentially limiting their benefits, MHEs claim that it would potentially still increase their overall consciousness.

4.2.9.2 Governmental Legislations

Notably, MHEs commonly agreed that government intervention is essential to protect vulnerable individuals and young adults from the negative impacts of SM.

Furthermore, all sources reached a consensus that implementing strict age restrictions controlled by mandatory ID sign-ups would reduce the risks for teenagers, who represent one of the most vulnerable demographics. Moreover, it could lead to healthier content distribution as users promoting or sharing harmful content could be identified more effectively. However, the possibility of fake IDs bypassing this measure remains a concern. An alternative approach using video-verified sign-ups might prove effective but requires more effort from the platform's side.

German MHEs express data concerns about TikTok. To address these issues, MHEs advocate for banning apps from countries non-compliant with data protection regulations and storing data on local servers could improve control and compliance within the country.

Next, to emphasise that a societal issue is experienced, displaying SM awareness campaigns could help to achieve a broader understanding of the issue. However, it's important to display such campaigns where users will see them, for instance on TV or the platforms themselves.

Moreover, ongoing research efforts are required to keep up with the pace of the quickly developing technological landscape and its effects.

Overall, collaborative efforts and ongoing research are essential to ensure the well-being of young adults in the digital age.

4.2.9.3 Education

All findings highlighted the urgent need for more awareness. While emphasising SM benefits, MHEs emphasise that users must learn how to use SM correctly.

The literature review and the MHEs commonly agreed that platforms must modify their algorithm. While this could be challenging to implement, the shared concern stresses the importance of educating users about the algorithm's impact on their SM experience and the potential risks associated with general SM usage. Since MHEs agree that integrating time-limiting options integrated within the platforms might contain challenges concerning personal rights, it's crucial for users not only to be aware that limiting screen time to 2 hours is beneficial, but they must also be provided with practical methods to reduce and manage their screen time.

MHEs identified teenagers as the most critical target group, emphasising the importance of educating them about SM before they start using it. Considering that the global standard age to start SM is 15 or younger, an urgent requirement for mandatory media literacy programs starting from an early stage has been identified in the literature. Media literacy programs should include information on algorithms, their impact, and how users can control their content consumption. Thus, it would be most efficient to integrate it into school curricula. Additionally, MHEs emphasise the importance of educating parents about the consequences of SM to promote healthy SM usage at home.

MHEs further encourage users to take an active role in managing their online experience, such as diversifying content consumption and seeking positive, which can counteract negative algorithmic reinforcement and empower young adults to become mindful consumers. Being selective with followers and unfollowing accounts that negatively impact mood, utilising features like 'this does not interest me' button can promote a healthier SM experience according to MHEs experiences. Ultimately, fostering a balanced and responsible approach can promote MH and a sense of community among young adults on SM.

5 Chapter five: Conclusion

As the world becomes more digitalised, investigating and researching the impact of SM on the MH of young adults is essential to uncover potential risks and benefits associated with their digital engagement.

Therefore, the overarching research objective was to investigate the impact visual SM platforms have on Gen Z cross-culturally. Accordingly, conducted interviews and the literature review explored the complex relationship between SM use and Gen Z's MH and helped to investigate the previously defined research questions.

Hence, this chapter will answer pre-defined research questions based on the gathered findings and insights.

1. To what extent does social media trigger mental health concerns among young adults?

While the impact may vary, the consensus is that SM can play a substantial role in shaping the psychological and emotional experiences of young adults. However, the concerning aspect is that despite the visual platforms' popularity, Gen Z is also experiencing higher rates of MHC than any generation before, including anxiety, depression, body concerns, and low self-esteem being the most prevalent. These findings further raise important questions about the potential correlation between SM usage on young adults' MH.

Instagram and TikTok were not only identified as the most popular platforms among Gen Z but also as the most problematic ones, primarily due to their visual and algorithm-driven nature. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that literature produced conflicting outcomes, with some studies indicating a negative correlation between SM usage and MHC, while others found no direct association.

To conclude, findings suggests that the impact on Gen Z's MH is multifaceted and individual and thus cannot be generalised. Therefore, multiple factors have been identified that can measure SM harm including excessive usage patterns, passive vs. active usage, the belonging to a vulnerable group as well as the impact of design features such as the exposure data privacy lacks, the algorithm, influencer, filter, harmful content and to what extent the user benefit from community support. These variables will be discussed in *1.1*.

Nevertheless, the vague results found in the literature and MHEs interviews underscore the ever-evolving SM landscape that keeps introducing new design features. It can be assumed that the evolving nature of SM, along with continuous introductions of new design features and functionalities, can outpace research efforts to comprehensively evaluate their effects on MH. It can be further assumed that the widespread use of SM creates an environment of intense competition among platforms, especially among virtual ones. It seems like each platform seeks to outdo its competitors by introducing novel features or adopting successful elements from other platforms, resulting in an ever-changing landscape, making it challenging for researchers to keep up with the effects of these constant changes on users' MH. Instead of prioritizing user safety, new design features appear to be solely aimed at prolonging the user's engagement on platforms.

Consequently, the relationship between SM use and MH is highly complex and findings emphasise the need for a comprehensive approach to address the MHC caused by SM usage. Suggestions for this approach can be found in section 5.2. Nevertheless, it's important to recognise that SM is just one factor among many that influence MH and individual experiences may vary. Overall, it can be concluded that SM can be an amplifier for mental problems whose causes lie in the real world. Nevertheless, for identified vulnerable groups, especially those with existing MHC, SM can cause more harm than.

Research also revealed the considerable positive aspects of SM, including fostering a sense of community support, awareness-building, and promoting connectedness. These benefits can be especially valuable for minorities, LGBTQ+ members, or others who might seek support from allies. Additionally, positive well-being is associated with self-expression and self-presentation, as SM empowers individuals to freely express their true selves.

1.1 What factors related to social media specifically trigger mental health concerns?

Research indicates that the harm and concerns associated with SM cannot be generalised. The interviews with MHEs further suggest that each country assesses a platform's harm based on its specific design features or observed aspects that can be detrimental. These findings align with the existing literature, supporting the notion that platform evaluation varies based on the implemented features, which can also be viewed as trigger to potential negative impacts.

It has been identified that individual usage patterns, such as excessive usage, whether an individual uses it actively or passively, and whether the individual belongs to an identified vulnerable group play a significant role.

In conclusion, excessive SM usage is not solely determined by the number of hours spent but also by the individual's purpose and psychological state. Understanding the underlying reasons is crucial for developing effective interventions to mitigate the negative impact on MH. Neglecting real-world responsibilities can make SM usage problematic. Although excessive time on SM is recognized as potentially harmful, the lack of consensus among experts regarding recommended time underscores the necessity for clear guidelines to aid Gen Z in establishing healthy limits.

The analysis also highlights the importance of understanding how SM can impact certain demographic groups differently and recognizing that certain segments of the population may be more vulnerable to negative effects. Identified vulnerable groups can include (young) females, teenagers, and people with already existing MHC. But also, males show an increasing risk towards certain content, especially to FitSpO and content entailing risky challenges. Furthermore, individuals with unstable support systems, disadvantaged social backgrounds or going through unstable life phases due to external or personal circumstances, such as a pandemic or significant life transitions, are also identified as vulnerable groups. Understanding these variations in impact is vital for tailoring appropriate interventions and support to address the specific needs and challenges faced by these demographics.

Moreover, specific design features that lead to privacy invasions were identified as crucial factors. TikTok's data storage practices not conforming with EU laws, the option to have public SM accounts, and location-sharing features are among the key concerns. Addressing these critical design features is essential to safeguarding user privacy and promoting a safer SM environment.

The algorithm is identified as the most critical element, not only enabling endless scrolling but also reinforcing the exposure to specific content that can trigger emotionally vulnerable individuals. Originally designed to enable microtargeting for businesses, it presents content presumed to match user's needs, but this can be extremely dangerous as it may worsen their current mood, creating an endless loop of customised content. Additionally, even healthy individuals can be exposed to harmful content, such as self-harm material, without actively

seeking it. Moreover, it has been suggested that the algorithm fosters addictive behaviour, leading to prolonged and excessive SM usage, which can have detrimental effects on MH. Addressing the impact of the algorithm and findings ways to mitigate its negative consequences is crucial for promoting a healthier SM experience.

Influencers and filters have further been indicated as critical in shaping SM's impact. While Influencers can offer support, their portrayal of idealised images and lifestyles, often leads to wrong self-perception and low self-esteem, especially among insecure or young individuals. User may develop a critical attachment to specific influencers, imitating and idealizing their actions. The increased availability of filters and editing tools further contributes to portraying idealised images and lifestyles, fostering social comparison, negative self-perception, and low self-esteem, particularly among insecure or young individuals. While harmful content can be subjective, particularly Fitspo and beauty-related content can exacerbate social comparison, leading to anxiety and depression symptoms. Fitspo content can even contribute to body dysmorphia and eating disorders in both females and males, while beauty-related content sets unrealistic ideals and can damage self-esteem. Additionally, (dangerous) SM challenges have been identified as problematic, specifically among males.

In conclusion, SM can intensify real-world problems by promoting unattainable ideals. Addressing these concerns is crucial for creating a more inclusive and supportive digital environment, accommodating the diverse needs and well-being of users.

2. To what degree do we experience a universal issue?

The findings consistently highlight the prevalence of SM in Gen Z's lives, indicating its global relevance. However, it's essential to recognise that SM usage and its impact are not uniform among individuals.

Research provides compelling evidence that SM's influence on young adults' MH is not restricted to demographics or geographical boundaries, showing universal relevance across various cultural backgrounds and countries. While certain minorities, and other marginalised groups may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of SM, the influence of these platforms extends to individuals worldwide, exceeding cultural differences.

The challenges caused by SM are closely tied to the digital age and the emergence of Gen Z as a distinct geographic that is heavily engaged with visual platforms currently trending in the

digital landscape. Gen Z, being digital natives, have been profoundly shaped by the rise of SM, and their lives have become inherently intertwined with these platforms on a global scale. The generation's unique characteristics and the ever-evolving nature of SM, create a universal context, demanding extensive research to explore the complexities of MH and its interplay with digital technologies.

To conclude, the consistent identification of common MHC across countries suggests that these issues are inherent to the generation itself and go beyond cultural differences, making them a universal phenomenon. Addressing these concerns requires further research to develop comprehensive support strategies tailored to the needs of Gen Z.

2.1 What are potential key differences based on Irish, German, and U.S. NGO data and reports?

Overall, the research indicates the universal nature of concerns regarding SM's impact on Gen Z's MH, however, a few differences were identified.

One consistent finding is that the negative effects caused by specific design features are recognized across all countries, though the weighting of their impact varies among MHEs from different regions. German MHEs are particularly concerned about data privacy, focusing on TikTok due to its Chinese origin and non-compliance with EU laws. Interestingly, US MHEs also worry about TikTok, but more due to its addictive potential driven by the algorithm and endless scrolling options.

Irish MHEs identified Instagram as the most harmful platform in Ireland due to its image-centric nature and the role of its algorithm. The circulation of self-harm videos, especially on Instagram is a present issue in Ireland expressed by MHEs. Moreover, Irish MHEs claim that its visual focus contributes to a social comparison where young adults constantly measure themselves against idealised portrayals of others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and harm. The algorithm's role in perpetuating harmful content intensifies the risks associated with Instagram usage in Ireland.

In all countries, the average SM usage among Gen Z exceeds recommended limits, but the specific recommendations vary significantly, with Irish and German MHEs advocating for a maximum of 2 hours daily and US MHEs being content with anything below 5 hours.

In conclusion, these varying recommendations from different countries universal guidelines for SM usage are urgently needed to promote a consistent guideline to Gen Z.

Moreover, German and US MHEs express particular concern for minority groups, such as certain ethnic groups or LGBTQ+ members. On the other hand, Ireland noted an increased concern for the male demographic.

To conclude, the consistent identification of common MHC across countries suggests that these challenges are inherent to the generation itself and go beyond cultural differences. Therefore, addressing these aspects requires comprehensive strategies that should be tailored to the generation's needs, instead of cultural. However, more cross-culturally in-depth research by comparing more countries is required.

3. Are there approaches to prevent the negative impact of social media?

MHEs emphasise the significance of finding a balance in using SM responsibly, incorporating healthy content and setting reasonable time limits. Therefore, educational initiatives, MH support systems, and platform design that prioritises user well-being can help mitigate impacts and foster a healthier relationship between SM and Gen Z.

The findings underscore the need for greater authenticity on platforms, media literacy education, and increased accountability of SM companies which will be further discussed in 3.1. Involving MH professionals closely in the development of new design features could hold SM companies more accountable. By doing so, the focus would shift towards creating features that promote user's MH, rather than aiming to engage users for prolonged periods. Therefore, MHEs advocate for collaborating with MH professionals to ensure the features' impact on well-being is thoroughly considered during the design process.

TikTok's rapid growth and large user base of Gen Z, presents an opportunity to educate young adults on various topics, including responsible SM use, to ensure that the correct target audience is reached. Nevertheless, since TikTok is relatively new, more research is required to fully assess its impact on Gen Z.

Overall, findings criticise the lack of sufficiently protecting vulnerable groups from harmful content. Therefore, policymakers, MHEs, and technology companies must collaborate to address these issues and create a safer online environment.

Empowering teenagers with media literacy and emotional intelligence skills is crucial, given that harm often begins during the teenage years. Thus, early intervention and proactive

prevention from a young age are essential in promoting positive MH outcomes. These steps will further be elaborated and discussed in the following.

3.1 What do Irish, German, and US NGOs recommend when dealing with social media?

All NGOs recognise the need to implement several strategies to promote a healthier and more balanced relationship with SM.

In all three countries government legislation is seen as crucial to tackle the growing concerns surrounding SM usage. Strict age restrictions and mandatory ID sign-ups are suggested to reduce risks for teenagers, a vulnerable segment of SM users. Nevertheless, implementing such measures would require a comprehensive strategy to prevent bypassing through means like fake IDs.

Next, educational program to promote SM usage, rather than strict censorship is widely desired. Self-regulation and media competence are highlighted as essential to navigate safer through SM and prioritising MH. Thus, MHEs emphasise the importance of SM awareness campaigns to educate young adults on healthy ways to handle SM and the potential risks involved. However, such campaigns must be carefully planned and displayed on platforms that guarantee visibility to Gen Z. Secondly, fostering media competence from an early age is vital for young individuals to evaluate and navigate algorithm-suggested content effectively. Therefore, it's advised to have mandatory media classes introduced in school from an early age.

Next, all MHEs advocate for notification within the apps themselves to increase awareness. Consequently, labels on filtered posts, reminding users that it does not correspond with reality can help to increase awareness. Also, limiting screen time is crucial in reducing exposure to content that potentially triggers MHC. While notifications popping up when an unhealthy time limit is reached will not solve the problem completely it can help to create a more conscious online behaviour.

Promoting authenticity on SM is essential for creating a supportive and understanding online community. MHEs advocate for labels on content that have been edited, as it encourages a culture where individuals not only share highlights but also challenges which fosters a sense of connection and reduces pressure for constant comparison. However, it can be argued that

these notifications can be easily clicked away and forgotten quickly, potentially limiting their impact on promoting authenticity.

Finally, MHEs suggest that individuals must be aware that seeking support is crucial if negative feelings persist and or excessive usage patterns occur, impacting one's daily life. Awareness campaigns could highlight that talking to professionals can provide valuable coping strategies to navigate the challenges presented by SM.

Considering the similar responses from Irish-, German-, and the US MHEs it can be suggested that all countries acknowledged similar SM issues. Nevertheless, these varied recommendations suggest that tackling SM challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, considering cultural and legislative differences in each country. A global effort with comprehensive strategies, including education, regulation, and technological solutions, is suggested in promoting a healthier and safer SM environment for users worldwide.

5.1 Reflecting on Limitations

Throughout this research, several limitations were encountered that require critical examination. First, it was aspired to conduct interviews with more NGOs in each country, however, this proved to be challenging, as the NGOs' response rate was disappointingly low. This limited this study's scope and hindered the ability to gather diverse perspectives from a larger pool of NGOs. Additionally, identifying suitable NGOs was a demanding task, as not many organisations were focused on SM or had sufficient data to contribute. Moreover, the challenge in securing responses and interviews was compounded by the fact that all organisations approached were run by volunteers who often lacked the time and capacity to participate.

While research indicated that usage patterns are more significant than time spent on SM, it was challenging to pinpoint these specific patterns and their effects. Conducting a survey directly with participants would have been more efficient in understanding these patterns, but ethical considerations prevented this implementation. Overall, while some MHEs statements might have lacked accuracy or detailed steps to address issues, the reviewed literature was able to compensate for some of these gaps by providing additional insights and guidance.

Another limitation represents the cross-cultural comparison addressed in the research objective. While data collected from Ireland, USA, and Germany provided valuable insights, it's crucial to acknowledge that these insights do not represent the entire country or world. Being

high-income first world-countries, the findings may be similar and not generalisable to all global contexts, especially those with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, as both American NGOs were in the Western US, it's impossible to conclude the entire country.

Furthermore, the literature review also presented challenges as it was primarily focused on broader topics like SM or Gen Z usage rather than specific countries or demographics. The limited availability of literature focused more on general assumptions based on known Gen Z characteristics and thus limited the ability to make direct comparisons or draw conclusive insights specific to each country. Moreover, due to TikTok's relatively recent rise in popularity, a notably higher number of research papers were found discussing Instagram compared to TikTok. However, MHEs with significant expertise in TikTok compensated for this to some extent by sharing valuable insights about the platform.

While it's essential to recognise the limitation's impact on the research and acknowledge the potential implications for the generalisability and scope of the findings, it's noteworthy to mention that adequate literature and MHEs with essential expertise in this topic significantly contributed to understand SM's impact on Gen Z, as a generation.

Nonetheless, addressing these limitations, and building upon this research can lead to more robust and nuanced studies that offer a broader understanding of the relationship between SM and MHC in diverse cultural contexts.

5.2 Future Directions for Research on social media and its Impact on Young Adults' Mental Health and Outlook

This researched showed that further research is required to deeper analyse SM's long-term effects on well-being. The varying and sometimes vague results in MHEs opinions and the literature uncovered the need for a flexible and adaptive research methodology. As technology continues to advance, researchers, SM companies, MHEs, and other stakeholders need to work collaboratively to ensure more accurate results of SM's role in shaping young adults' MH.

Moreover, the researcher must work more closely with SM companies to include their positioning and confront them concretely about possible hazards resulting from new or existing design features, but also to include their point of view.

As research suggests that usage patterns are more crucial in assessing healthy online behaviour than time spent on platforms, focusing more on specific user behaviours patterns on SM may provide a more detailed understanding of their MH effects. For example, studying the relationship between specific content consumption patterns and MH outcomes could reveal more accurate risks and benefits of SM usage. Moreover, since literature discussing TikTok's long-term impact are limited, future research should focus more on its specific impact.

As SM design features are constantly developing, researchers need to adopt adaptable methodologies. Moreover, longitudinal studies that follow users over time and incorporate frequent data collection could help capture the effects of platform changes more effectively. Additionally, close collaborations between researchers and SM companies can enable a better exchange of information, allowing researchers to gain insights into upcoming platform changes and challenges.

A significant gap identified in this research is the inconsistency in recommended SM time usage and the lack of clear criteria to diagnose SM addiction. Consequently, the defined criterion for excessive usage leads to fewer official diagnoses and appropriate therapeutic approaches. To address this issue, developing an app in collaboration with SM companies that automatically collects data on individual users' usage time could provide more accurate data, leading to more precise criteria for classifying excessive SM use as a potential disorder and potentially more therapeutic approaches.

Lastly, to better assess potential international differences in SM usage and its negative consequences, it would be efficient to compare more countries and particularly countries that significantly differ in terms of their socio-economic nature or economy. For instance, comparing regulations and consequences with Asia, particularly China, where certain platforms are forbidden would potentially reveal interesting insights. Moreover, the research could focus on identifying if there is an increased life expectancy or happiness connected to limited SM access.

By doing so, a more accurate strategy can be developed to promote a healthier and safer digital environment for all users.

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7 Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Information Sheet



Interview Information Sheet

Title of Research Study:

„Unfiltered Reality: An investigation on the impact of visual social media platforms on the mental well-being of young adults among different cultures. “

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dear interviewee,

You are invited to take part in a research study to examine how visual social media platforms, such as Instagram may affect the mental well-being of young adults. I would like to interview you to ask you about your experience of working with mentally unstable young adults as well as about potential improvements/guidelines which could be implemented to protect vulnerable people. This research is part of my Master's Thesis in Journalism and Public Relations for Griffith College, Dublin.

Before you decide whether to take part in the study it is important that you understand what the research is for and what you will be asked to do. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep. You will also be asked to sign a consent form once you agree to answer the questions. You can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without giving a reason.

The purpose of the research study is to examine your thoughts about the influence of visual social media platforms on mental well-being as well as potential measurements that could be introduced by social media platforms to improve such.

You have been chosen because of your experience working in a field that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and the factors that have an impact on it. If you choose to take part, the interview will last approximately 15 minutes and will be arranged at a time to suit you through Zoom. **Alternatively**, the questions can be pre-submitted by email, and you can respond to them on a Word document **via email** if you prefer.

Information from the interview will be used to assess the impact of visual social media platforms.

Of course, you are free to stop the interview and/or skip a question at any time without giving a reason.

The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Each of the interviewees will be assigned a number and the key to real names and organisations will be kept in a password-protected folder.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need further information.

Yours sincerely,

Sophia Roik

+49 17621827728

sophiaroik@googlemail.com

Appendix B: Interview Consent Forms

Interview Consent Form Lucia Kleemann



Consent Form

Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
- The results of this interview will serve as a fundament for an international comparison.
- All information will be anonymised if wished. Interview data will be kept on a password-protected computer.
- Personal participant information will not be used for any reason and participants will not be identifiable in any published material.

- Taking part in this research is voluntary and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.
- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
 - Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
 - Brendan O'Caolain: Brendan.oCaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)

- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature _____

Researcher Signature _____

Interview Consent Form **Ronald Stolz**

GRIFFITH COLLEGE

Consent Form

Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
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 - Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
 - Brendan O'Caolain: Brendan.ocaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)
- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature _____

**AKTIV GEGEN
MEDIENSUCHT**
 Illerau 5 · 89293 Kellmünz ^{e.v.}
 Telefon: 08337 / 342 07 42
info@aktiv-gegen-mediensucht.de

Researcher Signature _____


Interview Consent Form: **Brian Higgins****Consent Form**


Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
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- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
 - Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
 - Brendan O'Caolain: Brendan.ocaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)

- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature  _____ Brian Higgins _____

Researcher Signature  _____

Interview Consent Form: **Jamie Nunez****Consent Form**

Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
- The results of this interview will serve as a fundament for an international comparison.
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- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
- Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
- Brendan O’Caolain: Brendan.ocaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)

- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature: _____



(Jamie Nunez)

Researcher Signature _____ *S. Roik* _____

Interview Consent Form: Maria Walsh-Healy


**Consent Form**

Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
- The results of this interview will serve as a fundament for an international comparison.
- All information will be anonymised if wished. Interview data will be kept on a password-protected computer.
- Personal participant information will not be used for any reason and participants will not be identifiable in any published material.

- Taking part in this research is voluntary and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.
- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
 - Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
 - Brendan O'Caolain: Brendan.ocaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)

- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature  _____Researcher Signature  _____

Interview Consent Form: Fiona Flynn

**Consent Form**

Researcher: Sophia Roik

- The aim of this study is to examine the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. It will examine potential causes as well as improvement areas.
- You will be asked 10-15 questions about your thoughts on the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young adults. The interview should last around 15 minutes.
- This research will be of benefit as it draws on the experience of people who are working in an organisation that is concerned with the mental well-being of young adults and are familiar with potential trigger factors arising from the frequent use of social media as well as things to be improved to better the overall situation.
- The results of this interview will serve as a fundament for an international comparison.
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- Personal participant information will not be used for any reason and participants will not be identifiable in any published material.

- Taking part in this research is voluntary and there will be no consequences for withdrawing.
- If you have any questions about this research, please contact:
 - Sophia Roik: sophiaroik@web.de (researcher)
 - Brendan O'Caolain: Brendan.oCaolain@griffith.ie (research supervisor)

- This project has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participant Signature _____

Researcher Signature _____ *S. Roik* _____

Appendix C: Interview Question Guide

Interview Questions for Master Thesis

The following presents the standard question guide that has been used for the interviews.

1) General Questions about Social Media Use

1. Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?
 - 1.1. Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?
2. Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?
 - 2.1. What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic?
 - 2.2. What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?
3. What ages are most vulnerable to social media content?
 - 3.1. Can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?
4. What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?
5. Based on your experience, which social media content do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?
6. Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

2) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

7. What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?
 - 7.1 To what extent are they related to social media?
8. What are the main mental health concerns arising from the use of social media?
9. To what extent do you believe has social media an effect on the mental health of young adults?

3) Prevention

10. What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?
11. Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (*e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing*)?
12. Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?
13. Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

4) Closing:

14. What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

Appendix D: Interview Transcripts

In the following all interviews with the NGO's are transcribed.

Interview Transcript: Lucia Kleemann

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: Lucia Kleemann, employee at Mental Health Crowd in Munich (LK)

Date: *The interview took place on June 15th at 11:30am MEST via Zoom.*

SR: Hi, first thank you so much for taking your time today and supporting me in my research.

LK: Hi, no problem, of course!

SR: As already mentioned in my emails, my research purpose is to investigate the impact of social media on the younger generation, especially among generation Z. I also want to figure out what things social media could do better and if there are any implications that could be introduced either from the platform or even by the government.

LK: That sounds like a super interesting topic, I am ready for the questions!

SR: Perfect! I hope its ok for you, that I will record this interview?

LK: Yes, no problem.

SR: Thank you a lot! So, the first question would be, based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

LK: Based on my experience, Generation Z spends 2-3 hours on social media daily.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

LK: Good questions, I think that 30 min would be more beneficial for their happiness, but it depends on the main use of social media. If you are an Influencer, 30 min a day are of course not sufficient.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

LK: I believe that every platform has its own micro problems. However, I think TikTok has the most. Since its Chinese, there are a lot of data and privacy issues that are not conform with our EU laws. However, I think every platform has its own issues.

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic?

LK: First, the data privacy issues, and that not enough sensitive content is censored, or even circulating on the platform.

SR: What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

LK: Let's think about cigarette companies. Since a few years, every cigarette package has a warning label on it. This of course did not stop everyone from smoking, but I believe the message of how unhealthy smoking it got in our minds subconsciously. I believe that platforms such as Instagram should also have a warning label once you open it saying "this is not the real life. Everything that you will see here, are solely highlights of a person's life. Do not consume the content if you do not feel well while consuming. Be aware, that nobody knows how their life really is".

I truly believe that if you would see this warning every single time when you are opening the App, the message will eventually be locked in your mind. I know that Pinterest has something similar introduced, e.g., when you search for depressions their instantly comes a warning "This is sensitive content, are you sure you want to consume it?", Instagram should have something similar.

On the other hand, it is so important to teach media competence from a young age. Parents but especially school should have the obligation to teach media competence from a young age on.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content, and can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

LK: I believe the younger the person, the more vulnerable they are since they do not have a consolidated self-esteem or worth yet. Also, every demographic with an instable support from parents and or friends are more vulnerable. Besides, people coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, may it be family or the area you grew up usually have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media. Next, girls have by far a higher risk to be negatively influenced from social media. Even nowadays, there is still the pressure of having the ideal body, which is immensely reinforced by social media. Everywhere on platforms you find women that represent the 'ideal portrait of a woman' in our society. You also see so many models or women with 'the perfect body'. Young girls feel the pressure to live up these standards and are therefore more endangered. If you have on top of that less guidance from your immediate surrounding, you run an even higher risk.

To sum up, the more strengthened your self-worth and self-esteem is, the less problematic is social media to you. However, young people who are preloaded with disorders, e.g., with an eating disorder are extremely endangered. The algorithm is dangerous, as it will show you even more content of the same sort once you watch something. If you are in a certain mood, content that correspond with it will be shown to you. The algorithm recognises this and will keep showing you content which will enhance the mood you are in. It's a never-ending cycle and extremely difficult to escape.

SR: This is a really good point. What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

LK: I want to make clear, that I do not believe that psychological disorders are caused by social media, this is why I find it hard to blame social media for everything. But I do believe that social media worsens the whatever state of mind you are in, due to the algorithm, which makes it so hard to get out of the loop.

The next hazard is data security. With social media, we share far too much private data. Also, young people tend to be naive sometimes when handling social media and forget, that what you post today might never leave the internet and can hunt you in 30 years from now.

Another issue is identity abuse and theft. It's a huge topic currently, and very dangerous if other people pretend to be you and act in your name. Resulting from this, bullying is still a crucial topic.

A shortened attention span, social isolation, and the constant comparison with everything. When I was young, I was only able to compare myself with classmates or friends, young people now must compare themselves to the entire world.

SR: This is so true. Based on your experience, which social media content do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

LK: I cannot generalise this as it is very individual. Any content that causes stress or hurts you in any way is dangerous. Also, any content that makes you compare yourself with others is critical. This is especially critical as social media allows you to compare everything, what you did on the weekend vs. what someone else did on the weekend, how many friends someone seems to have etc. Maybe you went to get ice cream with your friends on the weekend and you were happy about it until you saw that someone rented this crazy finca somewhere on the weekend and you feel lame about your own life. Since you can compare yourself with literally everyone around the globe, you might always feel lame about an aspect in your life.

SR: This is a very good point. Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

LK: For instance social isolation. Nowadays, most of the life of young adults finds place in the online world, and less in real life. They also struggle to differentiate what is real and what only takes place on e.g., Instagram. It can have a negative impact on my aspects in life, the most common ones however are eating- and anxiety disorders. Also, very common are a negative self-worth and the feeling of not being good enough.

5) **Mental Health Concerns among young adults**

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays? To what extent are they related to social media?

LK: Eating- and anxiety disorders, depression and social behaviour disorders are the most common. However, it's very difficult to say to what extent it's social media's fault but it's likely to have a link with it. I believe that if you are doing ok mentally, social media cannot do too much harm to you. However, if you are already mentally struggling it can cause a lot of harm.

6) **Prevention**

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

LK: Most importantly, media competence must be implemented as a mandatory subject in schools. Nowadays, this is so much more important than being able to analyse a poem or some other text. Young people must be taught of how to deal with social media in an appropriate way. I believe the school system as to be urgently modernised in this aspect and shift the focus. Media competence is one of the most important skills to have. Of course, this is too late for your target audience now, but especially with young kids, parents must implement clear rules when handling social media. No teenager needs to be always online, and they must learn to endure boredom.

But even us adults, or young adults, we must learn to not being confronted with or consume content permanently.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

LK: Of course, it could be useful to have a warning label whenever someone uses a filter or something like enhance their videos/stories or pictures. However, this is difficult to implement. Nevertheless, more honesty and transparency is urgently needed from all current platforms. For instance, since a few years, it is a duty to mark whenever a story or some kind of content has been created in favour for a business. This was an important step and already helped a lot I believe.

SR: Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

LK: An age restriction to social media platforms. All kinds of social media platforms should allow users to only register with their real name and age. To ensure the real identity of someone, everybody should upload a copy of their identity card as a must when registering to a new platform. This is the only thing I can think of, as on the other side I believe that everybody must bear the risk themselves when being on social media, it's not the responsibility of the platforms. However, it's important that everybody knows how to handle social media in a healthy way.

7) Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

LK: I believe everybody experienced at least once in their life, that they felt bad after consuming social media. My advice is to observe and identify the exact moment this occurs. Therefore, its important to identify in what moments I open my phone and go to social media. Does this occur in moments in which I feel good or bad? Observe, how your mood changes when consuming social media. How did you feel before? How do you feel after? Observe, what social media does to you and how it affects you.

Next, it can be helpful to scroll through your follower list every 2-3 months and decide, if the persons you are following are good for you or not. What does the person you are following do to you? Strictly unfollow everyone who makes you feel not good in any form.

Also, if you watch Reels on Instagram or videos on TikTok, use the 'this does not interest me' bottom in the bottom right. This will teach your algorithm what do show you and what not. It also helps you to escape the loop you are in.

A special advice from my boss is to regularly change the arrangement of the Apps on your phone. Every few weeks, open your home screen and change it. This will stop you from the process to open your phone and blindly open Instagram/TikTok out of habit. Having to look for the App will give you a quick moment to think about why you are using social media right now for what reason.

Lastly, it is so important to exercise mindfulness. To consciously tell yourself "Ok, I will take 30 minutes now for social media" will help you to enjoy it, but also to be able to close it after 30 minutes. I deeply believe that mindfulness is very important in handling social media.

SR: This is great advice. Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

LK: I really want to stress that social media is not all bad. Yes, it can be dangerous but also extremely positive. Also, I noticed, that there is a lot of positive content on it recently. On social media, many young adults find community support, reconnaissance, and literacy. You can also find immense support when you are feeling depressed or suffer from any kind of mental illness. A few years ago, you might have felt alone with your problems but not you can be certain, that someone in this world feels the exact same as you do right now with the same problems There is also a great chance that you will find someone that feels like you that published a video of how they felt better or what helps them. I believe that social media is a crucial way of reaching the younger generation nowadays and as a lot of benefits.

Interview Transcript: Roland Stolz

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: *Ronald Stolz (RS)*, Chief Executive Officer at Aktiv gegen Mediensucht e.V. (RS)

Date: *The interview took place on July 17th at 7:30pm CEST.*

8) General Questions about Social Media Use

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

RS: It depends, but I'd say 7-12 hours on average with all platforms included.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

RS: From 4 hours of use and above one should start to actively detox.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

RS: So, as our main client group starts at 18, we have almost only students attending our support groups until the age of 26 I'd say. The most used platforms are Instagram, TikTok and partly YouTube. TikTok definitely provides a different kind of risks, due to its endless scrolling option. Also its Chinese, and not very conform with our laws here.

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic?

RS: Instagram's and TikTok's feed are endless and provide the option to scroll without a limit. Besides, the saving of data also represents a risk and the algorithm in general, especially on TikTok. Instagram is slightly different, however, it's difficult to use one without the other as TikTok creators often have their Instagram account linked on TikTok. Both platforms are currently very hyped by everyone, which automatically makes them more interesting for everyone. As a result, there is a certain social pressure to be active there and you are drawn into the spell.

SR: What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

RS: To control them age-wise, it would make sense to have to do a video authentication when you first sign up, like the one you do when you register for online banking, for example. However, you can also easily bypass this by putting on a mask or whatever. TikTok, for example, still has the obstacle that you can only go live if you have a certain number of followers, but nowadays you can simply buy followers.

Introducing a time limit would make sense, but it would be difficult to reconcile this with personal rights. I think just having a hint "you've reached your time limit" is not enough on its own but can help create more awareness. In the end, I believe more education would help the most.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content?

RS: Generally speaking, I'd say 10-16 years old, so more the younger generation. However, from my support group I acknowledge that Gen Z, so anybody over 18+ has phases in their life, e.g., when they start university or recently graduated, where they experience more loneliness. These periods of adjustment often tempt this generation to turn to and consume social media more than usual. Especially when you had addictive online behaviour patterns before, these life phases can be a hazard.

SR: Can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

RS: As I said, rather than specific demographics I believe its more depending on your overall life circumstances. It varies per platform, but particularly Instagram and TikTok have higher risk when you are younger.

SR: What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

RS: Like gaming it's the increased feeling of loneliness and anxiety than can occur from regular social media use. But of course, also the pressure to maintain friendships, and to feel like you belong somewhere. The social component or the bonding component plays a big role here. The issue is that algorithm suggests too much never-ending content that you did not ask for, which makes it easy to get stuck. For that reason, media competence is so important to be able to evaluate all the suggested information and content.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media content do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

RS: First, all the content enhanced by filter that transmit a supposed idealised image is critical but also all content surrounded by nutrition und presumed 'healthy lifestyle'. Another issue I see are the influencer to which people form too strong attachment and/or let themselves to be too strongly influenced. This leads to the fact that anything the influencer does, e.g., all the products they advertise, their fashion style, their nutrition or entire lifestyle, will largely impact the person. Some users even fall into some kind of 'fan behaviour' and idealise anything the person is doing and or showing.

Besides, of course any content entailing sexuality, drugs or cyberbullying is critical as it's so difficult to navigate.

SR. Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

RS: ADHD, borderline and anxiety are common. The senseless and uncontrolled scrolling distracts and decreases attention span. Another issue is that users become emotionally numb, as they see too much various content, appealing to different kind of emotions in too short of a time span.

9) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?

RS: Besides the once I mentioned before, concentration is a huge thing. It's almost impossible to endure boredom. Gen Z is also often in home office nowadays and by themselves. Home office attributes to their loneliness, as it reduces even more social contact in addition to their social behaviour that takes place more online than offline. The home office contributes to a lack of motivation and a disrupted daily routine and makes it even more tempting to get distracted on social media.

SR: To what extent are they related to social media?

RS: In my support group I notice that a not self-controlled daily routine (for example caused by home office) triggers addictive-like behaviour patterns. On top of my regular social media behaviour, one get extremely triggered because when being in home office one is confronted with all media more easily and constantly.

10) Prevention

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

RS: Education must start at a very early age. Media literacy later in school is a good thing, however, parents must educate better from the day the kids become a smartphone. Therefore, there needs to be more awareness also on the parent side. Media literacy is useless if the immediate environment does not support it. For example, if a teenager comes home and wants to share with their parents/partner what they learned about media literacy at school, but parents don't pay attention or take it seriously enough at home, it doesn't help.

However, its not too late to teach students or Gen Z about media literacy now, but an environment must be created for it with supporting elements from all sides. And as I said, media literacy is most effective if it starts from the day a kid becomes first confronted with the internet, but unfortunately some parents or partners just don't care enough or know enough about it. So, this represents a crucial starting point for the future. More awareness and a higher inhibition threshold must be established.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

RS: To limit the time of usage would be beneficial, but unfortunately this is much in the personal responsibility. In general, it is very difficult to control something in a globally accessible app. Maybe the introduction of bothering notifications e.g., when a healthy time limit was exceeded could help as maybe the user will eventually perceive this at some point in subconsciously. Time passes by so easily when scrolling through social media, however, through this way awareness could be increased that the user was online for 2-4 hours and would become more conscious of their media usage.

However, we are talking about freely accessible devices that we also encounter a lot in everyday work, which makes it even more difficult. But it must be better controlled.

SR: Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

RS: First, introducing school and health and safety laws that regulate time limitations on devices, when at work or school. Then media literacy must be taught in schools from a very early age.

In addition, many apps from countries that do not comply with EU directives should be banned by legislation. If most apps and data were stored on German servers, they could be better controlled within a country.

SR: Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

RS: I think I have covered them all in the above.

11) Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

RS: Make use of support groups and use them more. Support group still has a negative connotation, especially in Germany, but it does help.

To have an open discussion group, which helps to find social contacts, to get to know people with the same problems, who become friends eventually helps to decrease one's dependability to use social media for social contacts. As a lonely person you don't have many possibilities to find new social contacts and one can feel alone with problems. Being constantly exposed to social media does not help and can worsen it. Therefore, support groups can help to participate more in group activities and find a place to fit in.

SR: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

RS: Social media platform providers need to be more involved in the issue. Besides, more needs to be done for parents. We, as mental health support groups, can help from 14, but not before. Parents are often left alone with the problem. There should be mandatory parents' evenings, which take parents more in hand, so that more can be done preventively.

But I want to emphasise again that it's not about permitting using social media, but about using it in a healthy way. We usually only react when it is too late, but it must be done to prevent it. Social media is widely used because it is much fun, but it is often noticed too late what it is doing to you, often unconsciously and only the least seek help. Social media addiction is often a slow process where you slowly start doing less exercise or going out less. Not everyone worries about it instantly, but these are the first signs that need to be prevented.

Interview Transcript: Maria Walsh-Healy

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: Maria Walsh-Healy (MWH), operations manager at Mental Health Mental Health Ireland

Date: The interview took place on June 28th, 2023, at 11 am CEST.

1) General Questions about Social Media Use

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

MWH: The stats are shocking, it's ridiculous. I hear many times that young people are online more than 5 hours a day, which is too much.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

MWH: I would say if I looked at this from a mental health perspective, more than 1 hour a day. I'd say anything over 1,5-2 hours a day is excessive use. If you imagine you read a magazine and you're confronted with perfect pictures etc. you would not read it more than 1,5 hours, so social media is a similar kind of consuming perfect pictures which I find concerning if its more than 2 hours.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

MWH: I hear the most about Instagram especially for Gen Z, Facebook not so much anymore as its more for older people. In terms of its influence and the perfection of picture, portraying a good life based on what I have seen.

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic?

MWH: Instagram specifically has the issue of portraying a good life, the perfect picture, the perfect filter. It is filters especially that make you look different cause it is widely believed that different is better which is of course totally wrong. You should embrace the person you are.

SR: This is very true. What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

MWH: For sure, the filtering limitations, Instagram should embrace more authentic post and encourage people to engage in authentic posting. For instance, if someone posts a picture with a filter on it, the platform should label it as such by putting a small description on it "This is a filtered/unfiltered post". I think it would help people to rationalise and differentiate if something is real or not.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content?

MWH: For sure teenagers aged 14-15+, but also people in their early 20s, but actual damage is done before that. People in their early to mid-20s nowadays grew up with social media and are already damaged. Back in my days, my mum used to take away magazines if they were not good for me or if I consumed them too much, but this is not possible for this generation. Especially 11, 12, 13-year-olds are not mature enough yet to differentiate + regulate what's good for them or what is harmful other than older teenager might do. They are stuck in the tunnel and absorb it and cannot take it away.

SR: Can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

MWH: I would say it's the young male demographic, as I see them being not able to express when they experience bullying online, which is a huge issue. Young girls on the other side are

taken up with the perfection which is demonstrated by social media. But I also believe that it depends on the household and family background. People with less family support might run a higher risk to be negatively impacted.

SR: What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

MWH: Their worlds are virtual, and their entire (social) life is virtual too. They are not getting an organic experience as young adults/children, which I believe is equally as harmful as the attainment of perfect body. Overall, it's an unbalanced life which is not healthy.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media **content** do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

MWH: In my eyes, the most harmful content would be criminal kind of content, gangs jumping on one person as a social media activity, while a lot of people get together to film someone else doing something dangerous. In general, social media challenges exert a lot of peer pressure to younger people to do the same thing. Also, picture-sharing from your private life can be a hazard. Some people, especially young couples tend to share intimate or even sexual pictures but forget that they are there forever, and screenshots can be taken. The guilt and hurt can be deeply impactful for a young person well-being.

SR: Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

MWH: Well, social media is not all bad, we use social media a lot to promote mental health. However, it can promote mental health concerns, but the algorithm can also help to show you help for your mental health concern. Social media content can help, as there is so much that is being shared about mental health concerns, prevention, and support. However, the algorithm can also be dangerous, but it depends on how you feed it. The balance of your social media life largely depends on the algorithm. If you choose to consume healthy content, the algorithm will fit it and show you more of this kind of content, but it will also do so the other way around. The negative content pieces can have a change in a person's perception, but it can also lift a person as it provides the tools for it to promote positive and helpful content.

2) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?

MWH: In recent years and especially among GEN Z, anxiety and depression has escalated. Young people nowadays grew/grow up in a different world which is impacted by the climate crisis, the pandemic, and wars. However, we do not know the long-term consequences yet. Another reason for the high anxiety level is the constant bad news they are confronted with. Back in the day, you were only confronted with bad news when you turned on the TV or opened the newspaper, but not its everywhere. Young people do not stand a chance to escape bad news, as they are available on every device and especially their phone which they hold dear to all day long. However, at this point we need to wait another 10 years to say exactly what consequences it had.

Originally, anxiety is a body's natural response to protect you from harm, e.g., to tell you to not walk into the burning house. But nowadays it's constant for young people, which is not good. Anxiety also causes you to not be able to function properly, but its also the lack of coping with it in normal situations.

SR: To what extent are they related to social media?

MWH: I suppose when you balance that with general media, I think there is a huge correlation. Especially when young people are used to their parents being also active on social media, it could be more intense. I believe that it always depends on the household, I don't think one can blame social media for it, they are only fulfilling their role. The choice is in the consumer how they consume the product.

When you read a newspaper, you read it once and maybe pick it up one or two more times when you want it, but social media is constant if you want it to. So, I believe its heavily depends on your own consuming behaviour.

SR: What are the main mental health concerns arising from the use of social media?

MWH: I do not have reliable data for this I'm afraid.

3) Prevention

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

MWH: I think more education around social media use is so important, but also changing algorithms, bringing thought leaders to the table to create an ethical committee for social media platforms. It would be useful to engage mental health professionals in social media firms. Social media platforms have a duty of care. In my opinion, they must change the algorithm and implement supportive notifications that pop-up when it's seen that a lot of harmful content is consumed. E.g., when the algorithm detects that a user is watching weight-loss videos/content there should be a notification coming up along the lines of "Here's a support line for people with problematic body images" instead of "Here are more tips of how to lose weight." Social media companies must make the algorithm more helpful and socially ethical.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

MWH: as earlier mentioned message/notification that pop up when critical content is consumed. Also, hints on a photo saying this photo are filtered/unfiltered – so that ppl would not try to chase perfection anymore, as they would know its not the reality. It is important that these things are subtly and not aggressive. Subtly nudging will raise more awareness and will be more successful. These are small changes that can make a huge difference.

Also, social media platforms should imply a non-instant upload, so that Instagram etc. have to pre-check it first. A media content that will get checked before by professionals is less likely to cause harm.

SR: These are great ideas. Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

MWH: I 100% believe that the government needs to step in more, just as the department of health & education. They often believe if it's not happening on school grounds it's not their problem, but they need to step in, it's a social issue and everybody needs to see it like that. I can see that schools slowly coming more on board, before that it was solely "a parent issue", and sometimes arrange informative evenings for parents. And yes, parents have a responsibility to some extent but it needs more than that. It's a social responsibility and it needs legislations that monitor the online consume. There should be more control on devices, e.g., build in automated control by manufacturers or similar. Now we trust parents to do

everything but this only work if more legislation in terms of what is seen as abuse will come in place. Also, age limits for platforms are important.

SR: That is a valid point. Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

MWH: More awareness + education. Social media is not always bad, you just must learn how to use it correctly as it depends on your behaviour towards social media how healthy or harmful it is to you. People must get educated and see the damage it can cause. Therefore, you should bring people to the table, educate them, especially guardians + parents + teacher, through this way much more can be done. Its important to not telling people what's good or bad but hearing experience and truly listen and learn from each other will make a great impact.

Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

MWH: One piece of advice for young ppl would be if you go through life with 5 friends you are a very happy person. Especially with the influencer nowadays, people strive to have as many friends as possible on social media. Young people feel embarrassed if they only have 70 follower on their socials and think "what are others thinking?".

But the more people you have on it, the more you get confronted with content, different viewpoints, and content. When it comes to your followers, choose quality over quantity. Do not chase followers, it counts what you are as a person.

SR: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

MWH: There is a lot of what could be done on social media. Every platform should be balanced, for every damaging post there should follow a healthy post. Technology is advancing at paces beyond our imagination we don't know what line is next for us. The industry keeps on growing and advancing without conversations in terms of ensuring social media is a possible positive experience for everyone.

Interview Transcript: Fiona Flynn

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: Fiona Flynn, Youth Development Manager at Bodywhys, Ireland

Date: The interview took place on July 27th at 11:00 MEST.

1) General Questions about Social Media Use

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

FF: In the Irish context it's very difficult to say as we don't have exact data about it. I would say that most young people use it more than 4 hours a day.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

FF: Based on my experience, over 3 hours a day is linked to higher levels of depression body image, anxiety, lower self-esteem.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

FF: In my opinion its Instagram as it's the worst for the body image, especially among young adults. Nevertheless, TikTok is on the rise, but Instagram is the most problematic at the moment.

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic?

FF: The largest issue is its image centric nature. We recognized that non-image centric is healthier, such as Twitter. Especially Instagram and also Tik Tok are image centric. The issue with particularly Instagram is that people with higher followers really do endorse ideals, in other words, people with more followers tend to follow media ideal body ideals. These ideals are usually thin females and muscular men. This has increased the exposure to body ideals, and immensely increases body dissatisfaction.

SR: What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

FF: Bodywhys is linked to other NGOs, and we talk a lot about the algorithm. Social media uses it to ensure that people see stuff that they are interested in, but its harmful. The algorithm continues to send similar content, which can be harmful e.g., when you have a negative image of body image. It's especially harmful then as all the content show thin models, likewise if they were clock on diet relation content, they will see non-stop unhealthy strategies to lose weight. They will receive an overload of content showing very slim models, heavy weighting strategies, which eventually will make them more unhealthy push them to lose more weight.

There the algorithm can be damaging in terms of body images, but also for guys. If a guy were to search strategies to become more muscular, he will get different images, similar strategies about bulking up, most of them very likely to be extremely unhealthy.

SM companies have technology to recognise who uses the platform, and instead of using this technology to direct harmful content away from young ppl (that's what we hope they would do) but they do the opposite. For this reason, it's so important to promote media literacy especially for young people as they spend so much time on SM. They must be aware of negative effects, and how can they mitigate it, promote social benefits with media literacy. Bodywhys will be doing a lot around social media literacy + media literacy in general soon, as we believe it to be so important.

Young adults must know that the image is not real, they should receive media literacy in advance before using SM. They must learn that SM does not transmit the real world. They must learn how to follow content that makes them feel good, and identify negative feelings, when they see something that is not good for them. They must understand that it's also in their power to not see it, they can choose the content they can see.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content?

FF: I'd say young adolescents, around 10-14 aged. It's the most critical age where young adults are already on SM. It's also a critical age for the development of body image concerns.

SR: Can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

FF: What we see is that gender, and body image issues used to be more associated with females, but we don't see that anymore. There's a huge increase in body image concerns among males of all ages. It's now pretty much an equal issue for both. However, I could not name a specific demographic, but probably people or teenager with less family support.

SR: What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

FF: Body image issues!

SR: Based on your experience, which **social media content** do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

FF: Definitely, Fitspo content. We noticed that especially this content is directly related to body concerns and a reduced self-esteem.

SR: Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

FF: Higher level of depression, anxiety, loneliness. SM can really amplify feelings of loneliness; however, it seems to depend on the way how they consume SM.

Passive vs active SM use vs active use is an important aspect. We noticed that active use is more positive, whereas passive SM means that the person is just online scrolling and not really engaging, which seems to be detrimental to the overall mental well-being.

12) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?

FF: Depression, anxiety, and especially self-harm are common issues here in Ireland. Unfortunately, suicidal behaviour is as well very common in Ireland.

SR: To what extent are they related to social media?

FF: Cyber bullying is very dangerous and can have drastic negative effects on mentioned on MHC above, especially self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

SR: What are the main mental health concerns arising from the use of social media?

FF: Low self-esteem and wrong self-perception are often caused by image-centric SM and often leads to eating disorders or in the worst-case self-harm.

SR: To what extent do you believe has social media an effect on the mental health of young adults?

FF: I believe that the algorithm increases the exposure to self-harm content and can have a bad effect on mental health.

13) Prevention

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

FF: Education!! The importance of it must be emphasised. Education about media literacy especially for children/teenagers in school and parents so that they know about the stuff, and how these factors can have a role in body image pressure. They must learn how to moderate SM use and increase awareness of less usage. Parents can help doing that but also the apps itself can remind us to limit time. I believe that awareness campaigns are essential so that people become aware of the issues, as I believe that so many people might still not be aware of its dangers.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

FF: I suppose to link with mental health organisation, have mental health experts included in the team when developing new features. Collaborations with NGOs could also be useful, to simply put their heads together and figure out what can be done. Also promote more awareness, especially on the platform themselves.

SR: Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

FF: Having clear guidelines would be valuable. Also let people know what screen time does. If we were told than more than 2 hours of SM a day is harmful to your health, people would maybe be more likely to stick within this time limit. Therefore, awareness campaigns must be introduced. Campaign must also be placed were people see it. We have so many research papers, but they don't do much if people do not see them.

SR: Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

FF: Promoting health in school, especially about cyberbullying. Just because its online does not mean it's less harmful. Parents must also become more aware of how they children use media from an early age on. I often think, they would not let their child do things in real life, but why are they allowed to do that online. Gen Z has been online their entire lives, and the following generations now will be the same. Thus, it's important to teach them too.

Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

FF: Definitely to limit their screen time.

SR: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

FF: Maybe it would be useful to have a website just dedicated to body images. However, there's no point if it does not reach the correct audience. Therefore, one need to find a medium and channel, that best reaches the problematic demographics.

Interview Transcript: Brian Higgins

Interview Questions for Master Thesis

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: Brian Higgins (BH), Executive & Creative Director at Mental Healthy F.i.T. Utah, USA

Date: *The interview took place on June 28th, 2023, at 6 pm CEST.*

1) General Questions about Social Media Use

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

BH: Over 8 hours a day.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

BH: Depending on the use, if you use it for education purposes I would not say there is a critical limit per se, but anything over 4 hours of non-educational content is concerning.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

BH: TikTok

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic

BH: The addiction that comes with it through its tailored content.

SR: What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

BH: They could try to limit it by making you resign in after 1 hour, however it would be a self-resign. Overall, I think time limits would help but its difficult cause of freedom of speech etc.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content?

BH: 18-16 old.

SR: Can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

BH: I'd say across the board, I could not name one specific.

SR: What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

BH: Loss of motivation, loss of ability to regulate emotions and difficulties of interpersonal connections.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media content do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

BH: Specifically, content that affects the body image, so I'd say Fitspo material especially.

SR: Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

BH: Regulation of motivation and attachment.

2) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?

BH: Depression, suicide, body dysmorphia and anxiety.

SR: To what extent are they related to social media?

BH: Well, all these things existed earlier, before social media. However, social media worsens it.

SR: What are the main mental health concerns arising from the use of social media?

BH: Depression.

3) Prevention

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

BH: They must consume more educational content. Social media can be beneficial if you use it correctly, as you can use it to ask for help anonymously for example. But yes, the focus must more be placed on educational content.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

BH: Offer different experiences, for instance by implementing an option to choose a path you one could take e.g., by selecting beforehand "I want only this kind of content", it would change the algorithm. Overall, they must take more accountability and responsibility for what is displayed on the platforms.

SR: Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

BH: Here in Utah, we already have somewhat of regulations when it comes to content that is not appreciated from a religious standpoint. Overall, I believe that everybody should register with their ID to use social media as they would be more held accountable for posted content. I do not believe so much in censorship, instead more programs should be created that show responsible handling with social media. Moreover, more educational programs are needed and free resources at government level.

SR: Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

BH: all of the above.

4) Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

BH: Try to limit your time and try to consume more educational content.

SR: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

BH: Besides all the negativity, try to stay positive instead of reacting negatively.

Interview Transcript: Jamie Nunez

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Sophia Roik (SR)

Interviewee: **Jamie Nunez**, Western Regional Manager at Common Sense in San Francisco , USA (JN)

Date: *The interview took place on July 12th at 6:00pm MEST.*

1) General Questions about Social Media Use

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours a day/week do young adults use social media nowadays on average?

JN: I do not have exact data, but at least 2 hours daily.

SR: Based on your experience, how many hours of social media would you consider as concerning?

JN: This is a very complex question and depending on several factors. During the pandemic the overall exposure to media has gone up, and it stayed up even in the post-pandemic world and its concerning. I think its concerning when there is too much correlation between lack of sleep and social media use, or misuse. A child/young adult not balancing their time can lead to misuse of social media. However, I believe more than 6 hours will result in greater sort of exposure to media misuse.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media platform represents the most problematic for young adults?

JN: I cannot blame a whole platform, but just the features on it. I could name three problematic features.

SR: What is it specifically that makes the platform problematic/ what features do you find problematic?

JN: First, a problematic feature is the location sharing. Several apps allow the constant sharing of one's location, especially Snapchat and Instagram. Especially for girls that could end up being a negative experience. So, I would say an app that has a location sharing feature is problematic.

Next, Instagram has the feature of where accounts can be completely public to anyone. When a younger person has a public account on e.g., Instagram where not only followers and friends can see posts, but literally everyone, there might be potential negative consequences for instance unwanted contact from strangers.

However, social media can also be a positive experience. Instagram increases social connections, especially for people that might feel isolated. It's also great for activism, but that fact that accounts can be public and e.g., girls experience public exposure or comparing oneself to another a potentially feeling left out.

A platform I find problematic though is TikTok, as it has the option of endless scrolling. It allows people to feel as there is no clear end point, and the algorithm keeps feeding them. The platform is laid out to cause addiction.

SR: What could the platform do to make it healthier for young adults?

JN: Just to work on those features to make it safer for everyone.

SR: What ages are most vulnerable to social media content? And can you name specific demographics that are known to have a higher risk to be negatively impacted by social media?

JN: Especially (young) girls and communities of colour/Latino/African American. We experience that kids from lower income families tend to spend more time on social media platforms. These above mentioned might be more prone to exposure that might result in stressors.

SR: What would you describe as the biggest hazard for young adults arising from regular social media use?

JN: I could name like 3-4 stressors that I classify as hazards arising from regular social media use. First, it's the physical stress, that occurs when one is exposed to bullying or something that happened online. Next, there's anxiety of staying connected to everyone. Another stressor is the mental stress that occurs by having something played over and over, as it's the case with endless scrolling. This leads to a shorter attention span and that younger people cannot stay focused. Also, the over exposure of social comparison can of course lead to several stressors and to depression. I cannot say that there is a direct connection to social media and solely blame social media for it, but I see definitely a correlation.

Another stressor is the behaviour stress, when a young adult is exposed to a situation is not having a balance to combat those dilemmas. For some time, we coordinated with the graduation school of Harvard, who found similar results.

SR: Based on your experience, which social media content do you think is the most harmful to the younger audience?

JN: I'd say trends that occur from time to time I'd say. I could point out a few trends. First, the TikTok challenges, that lead someone to outdo one another or do something harmful to themselves or others. I could point out so many challenges. For instance, about 7 months ago here in the US there was the challenge called 'Milk Crate Challenge', where people stack milk crates and tried to climb up to the top. Of course, 9/10 times someone got hurt. Besides, young girls and boys, but especially young men compare themselves in physical fitness. There is a lot of comparisons between guys when it comes to physical fitness. But of course, there is a lot of social comparison among girls too, when it comes to beauty content that tells you what they should or shouldn't look like. So, any content that promote this I find problematic.

Lastly, I'd say any content that includes hate speech is harmful as well.

SR: Based on your experience, what is a negative outcome of using social media for a longer time for the younger audience?

LN: The social comparison can negatively affect your self-esteem and perception.

2) Mental Health Concerns among young adults

SR: What are the most common mental health concerns among young adults nowadays?

LN: Depression, body dysmorphia and anxiety.

SR: To what extent are they related to social media?

LN: Tough to say, but it's very likely that they relate to social media especially among young adults.

SR: What are the main mental health concerns arising from the use of social media? To what extent do you believe has social media an effect on the mental health of young adults?

LN: This is tough to say. As I said earlier, you cannot blame social media entirely, but I see a correlation there.

3) Prevention

SR: What do you believe must happen for teenagers to have a healthier relationship with social media?

LN: I could name four areas that could be improved. First, there needs to be a greater legislative push and demand on social media companies to check that their users are exposed to healthy content and less exposed to unhealthy account. Next, social media companies must show a greater accountability for their algorithms. Also, there needs to be more education. School needs to teach social media from early on. Lastly, it could help to provide a platform that shows the positive aspects of social media to ensure more positive exposure.

SR: Based on your experience, what should social media platforms in particular do to prevent mental health concerns among young adults (e.g., are there guidelines that you would recommend introducing)?

LN: They should rethink their way the design the features of their platforms, increase its healthiness and reduce safety lacks.

SR: Based on your experience, what legislations/guidelines could the government bring in to protect vulnerable people and protect young adults from social media?

LN: The state of Utah has tried to pass a law to ban TikTok. Anyways, media companies should be prohibited to implement design features that cause addiction. However, the challenge is going to be in the implementation and to find an actual way that this is reinforced.

The state of Washington has media literacy use in class, and I strongly believe that this should be the case everywhere. Digital citizenship and media literacy should be mandatory in secondary education.

SR: Based on your experience, are there any other things that can be implemented to create a healthier approach to social media for young adults?

LN: An increase of positive highlights of social media, but there is also a need to create more skill-based lessons and education, where teenager learn how to confront digital dilemmas when being online. To sum up, I'd say, teaching skills and education in the classroom is very important. Also, parents and guardians need to have a greater sense to what their child is posting. Therefore, it could be beneficial to provide families with training and conversations to ensure a healthy balance in digital use.

4) Closing:

SR: What advice would you give younger people in dealing with social media?

LN: When I speak in front of students, I usually give them 3 tips: first, be clear of who you want to be online and do not sway from that. Try to be authentic to yourself online and be as you are in real life. If you are an artist, be an artist online. I also often tell them about the 3:1 role. For every mean or critical comment, they find, they should give the person 3 positive comments. Through this way, more positivity can be brought to platforms.

Lastly, know the difference between consuming, creating, and engaging content. Be aware of when you do what and try to balance them all out equally. Creativity means to share your own content, do not be afraid to stand out and be authentic to yourself. Next, engaging refers to communicating with friends and family online and lastly consuming refers to watching other people's content. So again, its very important to balance all three out.

SR: Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been covered by one of the questions above?

LN: /