Exploring Adolescents' Lived Experiences of Social Media Use and Mental Health: A Phenomenological Study From a Psychiatric Nursing Perspective

Zakiyah Mujahidah[1*], Dewa Ayu Saraswati[2]

[1]Universitas Salakanagara, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Ichsan Satya, Indonesia
*Corresponding Author:
Email: zakiyahmujahidah@gamil.com

Abstract.

The rapid expansion of social media has significantly influenced adolescents' mental health, yet most existing studies rely on quantitative approaches that fail to capture adolescents' subjective experiences. This study aims to explore adolescents' lived experiences of social media use and its impact on mental health from a psychiatric nursing perspective. A qualitative study with a phenomenological design was conducted involving 10 high school students in West Jakarta, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach. Data credibility was ensured through member checking. The findings reveal that social media use among adolescents has a dualistic impact. Positive effects include enhanced social connectivity, access to information, and opportunities for self-expression. However, negative impacts are more dominant, including anxiety, stress, depressive feelings, social comparison, sleep disturbances, and decreased concentration. These experiences indicate maladaptive coping mechanisms and emotional vulnerability in navigating digital interactions. Additionally, adolescents demonstrated emerging adaptive strategies such as limiting usage, avoiding negative content, and increasing offline engagement. This study highlights that the impact of social media is not solely determined by usage duration but by how adolescents interpret and manage their digital experiences. Therefore, psychiatric nursing interventions should focus on strengthening digital literacy, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies to promote adolescent mental well-being in the digital era.

Keywords: Social media; mental health; adolescents; phenomenology and qualitative research.

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology, particularly social media, has significantly transformed the patterns of social interaction and daily life among adolescents. Social media has now become an almost inseparable part of adolescents' lives, serving as a platform for communication, self-expression, and the rapid and widespread acquisition of information. The high penetration of social media use among adolescents makes this phenomenon a critical issue in mental health research, given that adolescence is a developmental period vulnerable to various psychological and emotional changes (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). From a mental health nursing perspective, adolescence is a crucial phase in the formation of self-identity and emotional stability; thus, exposure to the digital environment can directly impact an individual's psychological well-being (Gail W. Stuart, 2021). Various studies indicate that social media use has a complex relationship with adolescent mental health. On one hand, social media can offer benefits such as enhanced social connectivity, emotional support, and a space for self-expression and identity formation (Allen et al., 2022). Additionally, social media can serve as a means for adolescents to seek social support, particularly for those facing stigma or difficulties in face-to-face social interactions (Naslund et al., 2020). In the context of community mental health nursing, social support is a crucial protective factor that can enhance adaptive coping and prevent mental disorders in adolescents (Keliat et al., 2020).

However, on the other hand, excessive and uncontrolled social media use is associated with various negative impacts on adolescents' mental health. Studies indicate that high usage intensity correlates with increased risks of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and sleep disturbances (Kelly et al., 2022). Mechanisms such as social comparison, seeking online validation, and exposure to content idealizing others' lives are key factors triggering psychological stress in adolescents (Vogel et al., 2021). In fact, excessive social media use—more than three hours per day—has been reported to increase the risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression in adolescents (Riehm et al., 2021). This aligns with mental health

nursing research stating that prolonged psychosocial stressors can trigger emotional and behavioral disorders in adolescents (Mary C. Townsend & Morgan, 2021). Nevertheless, the literature also emphasizes that the impact of social media is not singular but is influenced by usage patterns, social context, and individual characteristics. Moderate and purposeful use can have positive effects, whereas passive, addictive, or social comparison-based use tends to have negative effects (Verduyn et al.).

From a mental health nursing perspective, an individual's ability to manage stress and use technology is significantly influenced by coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and environmental support (Yuhana et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to understand adolescents' subjective experiences with social media use to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on mental health. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design is relevant for this study, as it can deeply explore the meaning of adolescents' lived experiences regarding social media use. By directly understanding adolescents' perspectives, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more contextual and effective mental health nursing interventions to maintain and improve adolescents' mental health in the digital age.The rapid advancement of digital technology, particularly social media, has significantly transformed adolescents' patterns of interaction, communication, and identity formation. Social media has become an integral part of adolescents' daily lives, enabling instant access to information, expansion of social networks, and opportunities for self-expression. Globally, adolescents represent one of the most active user groups, with increasing screen time across various contexts (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This phenomenon raises serious concerns regarding its implications for mental health, especially as adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by emotional and psychological vulnerability (Stuart, 2021).

From a psychiatric nursing perspective, adolescence is a crucial period highly influenced by psychosocial stressors, including the digital environment. Social media can function both as a protective factor and a risk factor for mental health. On one hand, it enhances social connectedness, provides emotional support, and facilitates identity exploration (Allen et al., 2022; Naslund et al., 2020). On the other hand, excessive and maladaptive use has been associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and sleep disturbances (Kelly et al., 2022; Boers et al., 2020). Mechanisms such as social comparison and exposure to idealized online content are key contributors to psychological distress among adolescents (Vogel et al., 2021).Several studies have also reported that high-intensity social media use is correlated with an increased risk of mental health problems, particularly when usage exceeds moderate levels (Riehm et al., 2021). Furthermore, repeated exposure to digital stressors may disrupt emotional regulation and increase adolescents' psychological vulnerability (Townsend & Morgan, 2021). In the context of psychiatric nursing, this condition reflects an imbalance between environmental stressors and individual coping capacity, which may lead to emotional and behavioral disturbances (Yosep & Sutini, 2021).Although numerous studies have examined the relationship between social media use and adolescent mental health, most are dominated by quantitative approaches focusing on usage duration and psychological outcomes (Verduyn et al., 2021).

Such approaches often fail to capture how adolescents interpret, internalize, and respond to their experiences in digital environments. Understanding adolescents' subjective or lived experiences is essential to gaining a more comprehensive insight into the psychological dynamics associated with social media use. Within psychiatric nursing, exploring subjective experiences is fundamental for developing context-sensitive and effective interventions. A phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of individuals' lived experiences, including emotional dynamics, coping mechanisms, and interactions with their digital environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Speziale et al., 2021). This approach emphasizes not only what adolescents experience, but also how and why these experiences influence their mental well-being.Therefore, this study aims to explore adolescents' lived experiences of social media use and its impact on mental health using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the subjective meaning of digital experiences and the identification of both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms from a psychiatric nursing perspective. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more comprehensive mental health interventions, particularly in strengthening digital literacy, emotional regulation, and coping strategies among adolescents in the digital era.

II.   METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore adolescents' lived experiences of social media use and its impact on mental health from a psychiatric nursing perspective. The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they assign to their digital interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Speziale et al., 2021).The research was conducted through a systematic and sequential process, beginning with the selection of participants using purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, namely adolescents aged 15–18 years, actively using social media for more than three hours per day, and willing to participate in the study. This selection ensured that all participants had relevant and meaningful experiences related to the research focus. Prior to data collection, ethical considerations were strictly applied. Participants were provided with informed consent, and principles such as autonomy, confidentiality, anonymity, and beneficence were upheld throughout the research process.Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to freely express their experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses regarding social media use. Each interview was conducted until data saturation was reached, indicating that no new significant information emerged. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and richness of the data.

The data analysis process was conducted concurrently with data collection using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis began with familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. This was followed by an inductive coding process, where meaningful units were identified without being constrained by pre-existing assumptions. The generated codes were then organized into broader categories and further developed into themes that reflected patterns of shared meaning across participants' experiences. These themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure their consistency and relevance to the research objectives.To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied several validation strategies. Credibility was ensured through member checking, in which participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of the research process, while confirmability was achieved by grounding the findings in participants' direct narratives. Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the research context and participants' characteristics.
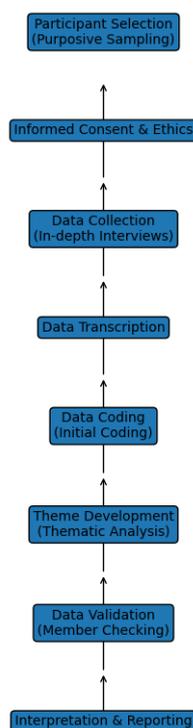
Fig 1. Research Flowchart of the Study

The overall research procedure, from participant selection to data interpretation and reporting, is illustrated in Figure 1 to provide a clear overview of the study flow. The final stage involved interpreting the findings in relation to existing theories and previous studies within the field of psychiatric nursing, followed by the preparation of a comprehensive research report. Through this systematic process, the study aims to produce credible and meaningful insights into adolescents' experiences of social media use and its implications for mental health.
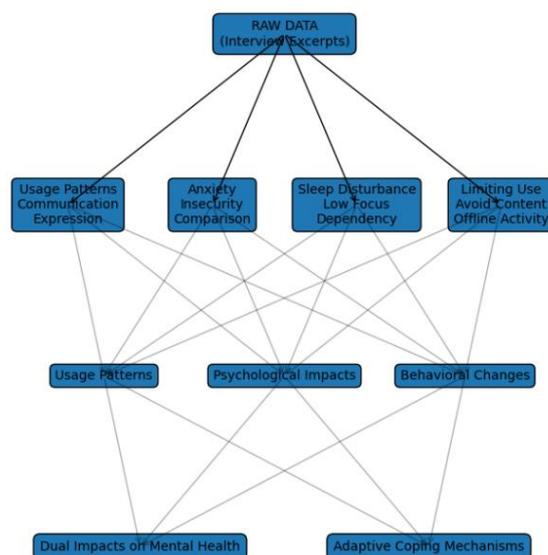
Fig 2. Thematic Coding Tree of Data Analysis

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Most participants reported spending a significant amount of time on social media, ranging from 4 to 7 hours per day. This activity generally takes place during free time, before bed, and after school.

One participant stated:

"If I really think about it, it can be more than 5 hours a day, especially when I am bored—I just keep scrolling and lose track of time." (P3)

Another participant also shared:

"Most often at night before bed; sometimes I intend to just do it for a bit, but it ends up taking way too long." (P7)

Participants experience various benefits from using social media, particularly regarding communication, access to information, and self-expression.

Regarding the ease of communication, participants said:

"The best thing about social media is being able to chat with friends anytime, even if we are not meeting in person." (P1)

Regarding access to information:

"I get a lot of info from TikTok or Instagram, so I stay more up-to-date." (P5)

As for self-expression:

"Sometimes I post a story to show my feelings or what I am doing—it just feels more free." (P9)

On the other hand, social media use also has negative impacts on participants' mental health, such as anxiety, stress, depression, and a tendency toward social comparison.

One participant shared:

"Sometimes I feel insecure when I see other people's posts; it is like their lives are better." (P2)

Another participant said:

"When I see certain comments or posts, I keep thinking about them and end up stressing myself out." (P6)

Regarding anxiety:

"If I do not check social media, it feels like I am missing out on something, so I get a bit anxious." (P8)

Excessive social media use also impacts participants' lifestyles, particularly regarding sleep, concentration, and the development of digital dependency.

One participant stated:

"I often stay up late because I am on my phone, even though I have school the next day." (P4)

Another participant added:

"When I am studying, I sometimes get distracted by checking social media, so I cannot focus." (P10)

Regarding dependency:

"It is like a habit now; if I do not check my phone, something feels missing." (P3)

To address these negative effects, participants developed various coping strategies, such as limiting usage, avoiding negative content, and increasing offline activities.

One participant stated:

"Now I am trying to limit my social media time so I do not go overboard." (P1)

Another participant shared:

"If there is content that makes me uncomfortable, I immediately skip it or unfollow." (P6)

Additionally, offline activities are also pursued:

"I have started trying to exercise more often or meet up with friends in person, so I am not constantly on my phone." (P8)

This study identified four major themes that reflect adolescents' lived experiences of social media use and its impact on mental health, namely social media usage patterns, dual impacts on mental health, disruption of daily functioning, and adaptive coping mechanisms. These themes were derived through a systematic coding process as illustrated in Figure 2.The findings indicate that adolescents engage in intensive and habitual social media use, with an average duration ranging from 4 to 7 hours per day. This pattern reflects not merely frequent usage but a form of embedded digital behavior that has become integrated into daily routines. Participants described their engagement as often unintentional and prolonged, particularly during idle time and before sleep.This finding suggests that social media use among adolescents has shifted from a functional activity into an automatic behavioral pattern, indicating early signs of behavioral dependency. From a psychiatric nursing perspective, such habitual engagement may reduce self-regulation capacity and increase vulnerability to psychological distress.The study reveals that social media produces both positive and negative psychological effects. On the positive side, participants reported enhanced communication, increased access to information, and opportunities for self-expression. These aspects contribute to the fulfillment of psychosocial needs, particularly belongingness and identity development.However, the negative impacts were found to be more dominant. Adolescents frequently experience anxiety, stress, and feelings of inadequacy triggered by social comparison and exposure to idealized content.

These findings indicate that social media serves not only as a communication platform but also as a space for continuous self-evaluation.The novelty of this finding lies in the identification of an imbalance between perceived benefits and emotional consequences, where positive engagement does not necessarily protect adolescents from psychological distress. This suggests that the quality of interaction, rather than mere access, plays a crucial role in determining mental health outcomes.Another significant finding is the disruption of daily functioning, particularly in sleep patterns and concentration. Participants reported delayed sleep due to prolonged screen exposure and decreased focus during academic activities due to frequent distractions.This reflects a spillover effect, where digital engagement extends into physiological and cognitive domains. In psychiatric nursing, such disturbances are considered early indicators of broader mental health issues, particularly when associated with emotional dysregulation and fatigue.Despite the negative impacts, adolescents demonstrated emerging adaptive coping strategies, including limiting screen time, avoiding triggering content, and increasing offline interactions. This indicates a level of self-awareness and the ability to regulate digital behavior.Interestingly, this finding highlights that adolescents are not merely passive recipients of digital influence but active agents capable of negotiating their experiences. This adaptive capacity represents a critical entry point for mental health interventions.

The findings of this study confirm that social media use among adolescents is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. While previous studies have largely emphasized the correlation between usage duration and mental health outcomes (Kelly et al., 2022; Riehm et al., 2021), this study provides deeper insights into how adolescents experience and interpret their digital interactions.One of the key contributions of this study is the emphasis on lived experience as a determinant of mental health impact. Unlike quantitative findings that focus on frequency or duration, this study demonstrates that subjective interpretation, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms shape psychological outcomes. This aligns with the phenomenological perspective, which prioritizes meaning-making processes in understanding human behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018).Furthermore, the dominance of negative emotional experiences supports existing evidence on social comparison and digital stressors (Vogel et al., 2021). However, this study extends previous findings by revealing that positive aspects of social media do not necessarily mitigate negative outcomes.

This challenges the assumption that increased connectivity automatically leads to improved well-being.Another important contribution is the identification of behavioral and physiological disruptions as interconnected outcomes of social media use. While prior studies have separately examined sleep disturbances and cognitive decline (Boers et al., 2020), this study integrates these aspects within a broader experiential framework, demonstrating how digital habits influence overall functioning.The emergence of adaptive coping strategies among adolescents represents a significant finding from a psychiatric nursing perspective. This suggests that interventions should not solely focus on restricting social media use but rather on enhancing adolescents' capacity for self-regulation, emotional awareness, and digital literacy. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary mental health promotion strategies that emphasize resilience and empowerment.Overall, this study offers a novel contribution by integrating psychological, behavioral, and experiential dimensions of social media use within a single analytical framework. It highlights that the impact of social media is not inherently positive or negative but is mediated by how adolescents engage with, interpret, and manage their digital experiences.
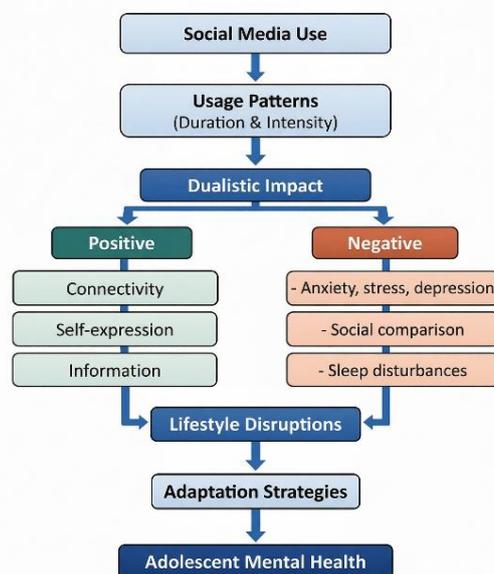
Fig 3. Conceptual Model of Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health

The conceptual model illustrates that social media use among adolescents begins with usage patterns characterized by duration and intensity. These patterns lead to dualistic impacts, consisting of both positive effects, such as social connectivity, self-expression, and access to information, and negative effects, including anxiety, stress, depression, social comparison, and sleep disturbances. These impacts subsequently contribute to disruptions in daily life patterns, which are then mediated by adolescents' adaptive coping strategies. Ultimately, these processes collectively influence adolescent mental health outcomes.The findings of this study indicate that adolescents engage in high-intensity social media use, ranging from 4 to 7 hours per day. This pattern not only reflects extensive exposure to digital environments but also signifies a

shift from direct social interaction to virtual engagement. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpret usage duration as a risk indicator (Twenge et al., 2021), this study reveals that usage intensity serves as an entry point into more complex psychological dynamics, particularly the formation of habitual and automatic digital behaviors.

From a psychiatric nursing perspective, such patterns may indicate early signs of behavioral addiction, characterized by diminished self-control, repetitive urges, and emotional discomfort when disconnected from social media (Stuart, 2021).In line with the conceptual model presented in the figure, this study demonstrates that social media exerts a dualistic impact on adolescents' mental health. On the one hand, positive effects such as social connectivity, access to information, and self-expression highlight the role of social media in fulfilling adolescents' psychosocial needs. These findings support the concept of social support as a protective factor in psychiatric nursing (Keliat et al., 2020). However, the novelty of this study lies in the identification of an imbalance between these benefits and the negative emotional consequences experienced by adolescents. In other words, the presence of positive engagement does not necessarily buffer or offset the negative psychological impacts. This finding suggests that the quality and interpretation of digital interactions are more critical than mere access or usage.Furthermore, the negative impacts identified—such as anxiety, stress, depression, and social comparison—indicate that social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as an intensive space for social evaluation. While previous studies have emphasized the association between social comparison and psychological distress (Vogel et al., 2021), this study extends the discussion by demonstrating that adolescents' emotional responses are shaped by how they interpret and internalize digital content. Exposure to idealized representations of others' lives often leads to cognitive distortions, resulting in unrealistic self-evaluation. In this context, social comparison acts not merely as a contributing factor but as a central mediating mechanism linking social media use to emotional disturbances.

From a psychiatric nursing perspective, this reflects insufficient adaptive coping mechanisms in managing digital psychosocial stressors (Townsend & Morgan, 2021).Another important finding is the disruption of daily functioning, particularly in terms of sleep patterns and cognitive performance. This study expands previous findings (Boers et al., 2020) by demonstrating that these disturbances are not simply direct consequences of prolonged screen time, but are embedded within broader digital behavioral patterns. This suggests a spillover effect, in which excessive engagement with social media extends into physiological and cognitive domains. In psychiatric nursing, such disturbances are considered early indicators of more complex mental health problems, particularly when associated with fatigue, decreased concentration, and emotional dysregulation (Varcarolis, 2022).Interestingly, this study also reveals that adolescents possess the capacity to develop adaptive coping strategies in response to the negative impacts of social media. Strategies such as limiting usage, avoiding emotionally triggering content, and increasing offline interactions reflect a growing level of self-awareness and behavioral regulation. The novelty of this finding lies in the recognition of adolescents as active agents rather than passive recipients of digital influence. This aligns with empowerment-based approaches in psychiatric nursing, which emphasize strengthening adaptive coping mechanisms to enhance resilience and psychological well-being (Yosep & Sutini, 2021).

Overall, this study offers a conceptual contribution by integrating social media usage patterns, dualistic impacts, lifestyle disruptions, and coping strategies into a unified analytical framework, as illustrated in the research model. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine these variables in isolation, this study demonstrates that they are dynamically interconnected and collectively shape adolescents' mental health experiences. Therefore, the impact of social media should not be understood as inherently positive or negative, but as a complex interaction between individual interpretation, behavioral patterns, and the digital environment.From a psychiatric nursing perspective, these findings imply that interventions should not be limited to reducing screen time alone. Instead, a more comprehensive approach is needed, focusing on strengthening digital literacy, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies. School-based and community-based interventions are particularly relevant in supporting adolescents to navigate social media in a healthier and more balanced way. Such approaches are expected to not only minimize risks but also optimize the potential benefits of social media in promoting adolescent mental well-being in the digital era.

IV.   CONCLUSION

This study concludes that social media use among adolescents exerts a complex and dualistic influence on mental health, shaped by patterns of usage, intensity, and individual interpretation of digital experiences. While social media provides significant benefits in terms of social connectivity, self-expression, and access to information, these advantages do not inherently protect adolescents from negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, stress, depression, and social comparison. A key finding of this study is that the impact of social media is not solely determined by duration of use, but by how adolescents engage with and interpret digital content. This highlights the importance of subjective experience as a central factor influencing mental health outcomes.

Additionally, excessive use contributes to disruptions in daily functioning, including sleep disturbances and decreased cognitive performance, which may serve as early indicators of broader mental health concerns. Importantly, this study reveals that adolescents are not merely passive users but active agents capable of developing adaptive coping strategies, such as regulating screen time and managing exposure to negative content. This finding represents a significant contribution from a psychiatric nursing perspective, emphasizing the role of empowerment and resilience in addressing digital-era mental health challenges. Overall, this study offers a novel integrative framework that connects usage patterns, dualistic impacts, lifestyle disruptions, and coping strategies in shaping adolescent mental health. Therefore, interventions should move beyond limiting social media use and instead focus on strengthening digital literacy, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping mechanisms through school- and community-based mental health programs.

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