Exploring Youth Social Media Habits Among University Students in Ethiopia: A Study on Selected Public Universities

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Abstract

This study explores the social media habits of university students, focusing on how youths engage with various platforms. It applies Social Network Theory and the Use and Acceptance of Technology Theory to examine the participants' uses and gratifications of social media. Data was collected from students at three public universities through surveys and in-depth interviews. The analysis employed descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Ethiopian youths are actively engaging with various social media platforms, including Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Viber. These platforms are primarily used for viewing others' posts, chatting with friends, discussing political issues freely, developing talents, and staying updated on current events. The study indicates that social media use among Ethiopian youths has reached a point of no return. A striking 98% of participants reported using more than one social media platform, with nearly 72% of them managing accounts on more than three platforms. Social media also offers numerous opportunities for youth, such as fostering friendships, connecting across national borders, developing personal talents, and generating stable incomes. However, challenges such as misbehaviors and misuse of platforms also persist. Based on these findings, the study suggests several recommendations: Users should better manage their time and social media interactions, group and page administrators should be more responsible for content management, and the government should intervene to curb misuse and abusive behaviors. Given that a lack of media literacy and analytical skills was identified as a challenge, the Ministry of Education should integrate media literacy into the education curriculum at various levels. In the meantime, Ethiopian universities should offer media literacy training to students.

Keywords*: Ethiopia, Social Media, University Students, Youths, Youths' Engagement*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to the platforms and applications that leverage web-based and mobile technologies, offering various forms of communication such as internet forums, blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photos, videos, and more, all aimed at turning communication into an interactive dialogue (Baruah, 2012; Shetty, 2015). Communication networks, whether facilitated by mobile phones or the internet, are transforming the scale, national boundaries, institutional rules, scope, and dynamics of social interactions (Hsi, 2007). Social media engagement involves individuals' online activities, such as posting, sharing, discussing, and commenting on topics of personal interest, including fashion, sports, education, religion, politics, and gender (Bigcommerce, 2019).

In Ethiopia, the growing engagement of youth with social media has become a matter of considerable concern. Young people today participate in various social media activities, such as watching movies, chatting, and browsing for new content. Social media has become a prevalent and integral part of their lives (Juszczyk, 2015). The bond between youth and social media is undeniable, with platforms like Facebook becoming central to their daily interactions (Tajuddin, 2013). As technological advancements, particularly in communication, continue to simplify internet access, young people increasingly incorporate social media into their daily routines (Tat, 2014). The widespread use of mobile services is also positively impacting the living standards of communities, especially by enhancing social capital and cohesion (Avis, 2015).

Ethiopia is often referred to as the "country of youth," as a significant portion of its population is under the age of 30. According to DataReportal, Ethiopia's population was 128.1 million in January 2024, with 23.4 percent residing in urban areas and 76.6 percent living in rural regions. Over 40 percent of the population is aged between 13 and 34.

The country has made substantial progress in improving formal education for its youth, from primary through tertiary levels. According to UNESCO (2018), both gross and net enrollment rates in primary, secondary, and tertiary education have seen significant improvements. As of 2015, the estimated access to education for individuals aged 15–24 years reached 69 percent.

The issues concerning youth have been given considerable attention. In 2004, the government developed and ratified the National Youth Policy of Ethiopia, a landmark initiative that recognizes and promotes the rights of young people, with the goal of fostering their active participation in the nation's comprehensive development.

In terms of communication infrastructure, Ethiopia has made notable strides in expanding access to information and communication technology (ICT). As of early 2024, there were 24.83 million internet users in the country, with an internet penetration rate of 19.4 percent. Additionally, there were 77.39 million active mobile phone connections, equivalent to 60.4 percent of the total population. Social media usage also saw growth, with 7.05 million users, representing 5.5 percent of the population in January 2024.

According to Statista (2024), Ethiopia leads Eastern Africa in terms of internet users, followed by Kenya (22.72 million), Tanzania (21.82 million), Sudan (13.99 million), and Uganda (13.3 million). However, despite these advancements, Ethiopia still lags behind in internet penetration compared to other East African nations. The country's internet penetration rate of 19.4 percent is the lowest in the region, falling behind Djibouti (65%), Kenya (40%), Sudan (28.7%), Uganda (27%), and Eritrea (26.6%). This is in stark contrast to leading nations such as Morocco (90.7%), Libya (88.4%), and Seychelles (86.8%).

Against this sociotechnical and political backdrop, this study explores the social media habits of Ethiopian youth, focusing on university students. Universities in Ethiopia serve as a meeting point for young people from all corners of the country. The study describes the social networking sites used by youth, examines their motivations for using social media, assesses the time spent on these platforms, and identifies the challenges they face. The survey is based on a proportionally randomized sample of university students to ensure an unbiased and accurate representation of the entire student body. This approach captures diverse perspectives, resulting in richer data and enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the findings. In addition, a few key informants are purposefully selected based on their extensive use of social media to provide deeper insights. Their unique perspectives reveal

patterns and trends that complement the interview data, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Social media platforms offer users the opportunity to develop creativity, social skills, and socialization among young people (Haddon, 2015). As a result, social media has various positive impacts, prompting youths to engage with these platforms for a wide range of personal and academic purposes.

Studies have identified the benefits and impacts of social media, especially for youth, who remain active on these platforms for various reasons. Asad Ali (2016) and Juszczyk (2015) discussed the positive impacts of social media, including fostering responsibility for learning, promoting independent time management, facilitating clear communication, sharing perspectives and experiences, and supporting structured discussions for debate. Moreover, social media increases participation and inclusion by providing users with the opportunity to generate content.

Social media has also created tremendous opportunities for education. Students and teachers can easily share materials and information, and social media offers simple, cost-effective ways to organize groups, arrange meetings, spread information, and gauge opinions (Baruah, 2012; Singh, 2016). Additionally, social media can help youth develop academically, improve their skills, enhance their living standards, and adopt new trends, fashions, and cultural practices (Shetty, 2015). The ability to access social media through mobile phones, iPads, and other mobile Internet devices has increased the amount of time youth spend on these sites, allowing them to share information quickly, cheaply, and in larger quantities than ever before (Avis, 2015; Grube, 2012). As a result, social media has become an integral part of how users interact in their microsystems of family, friends, and school by expanding online access and enabling instant communication (Russo, 2014).

University students, who were the focus of this study, generally have better internet access and spend more time on social media platforms for various purposes. Among the many advantages, Al-Rahmi (2017) highlighted four key benefits for higher education: enhancing relationships, improving

learning motivation, offering personalized course materials, and developing collaborative skills. University youth are expected to have a better understanding of and ability to use technology, as well as more access to the internet than others. As discussed by Grube (2012) and Juszczyk (2015), the availability of devices such as iPads and mobile phones maximizes youth engagement on social media.

As of May 2023, Facebook was the leading social media platform in Ethiopia, with nearly 6.6 million users. Messenger ranked second, with over 6.1 million accounts. On Facebook, users in Ethiopia aged 25-34 accounted for approximately 45.3% of the total user base, while those in the 35-44 age groups made up 22.1% (Statista, 2023). Given that Facebook's primary user base consists of youth, studies and policies addressing this phenomenon should be considered a national priority. Social media is attracting a large portion of the youth population, so it is crucial to understand its trends and the benefits young people can derive from technology.

Social media plays an important role in students' lives within higher education institutions. Youth engagement with social media is increasingly seen as an essential form of communication and creativity (Tajuddin, 2013). It is also evident that social media has contributed to the rise in online socialization among youth (Njoroge, 2013). The internet and social media have equipped youth with new characteristics that distinguish them from previous generations, with some even developing unique language reflecting the influence of technology (Kuyucu, 2014).

The ubiquity of mobile phones has created significant opportunities for the instant and low-cost dissemination of information. This "mobile miracle" (ITU, 2013) allows communities to access and share information quickly and in larger quantities than ever before (Avis, 2015; Osazee-Odia, 2017). While social media provides numerous benefits, it also has negative consequences. Scholars have noted that students often waste time on social media, sometimes engaging in behavior that deviates from societal norms, such as posting inappropriate images (Yirga, 2015). Additionally, youth can become obsessed with taking selfies and spend considerable time editing their pictures before posting them (Tajuddin, 2013).

Other negative impacts include the development of violent behavior from posts, the circulation of false information, and social media's effect on relationships, social well-being, and time available for sleep, school-related study, and other activities (Singh, 2016; Tat, 2014). Furthermore, the increasing time youth spend on social media can lead to addiction and stress, especially when they are unable to access their devices, resulting in poor mental health.

This alarming trend has attracted the attention of researchers, highlighting the importance of understanding the impact of social media to help youth cope with its negative effects (Baskaran, 2017; Edmonds, 2018; Russo, 2014).Despite the concerns, social media provides youth with the opportunity to express their ideas, emotions, and feelings freely, making it an enjoyable activity for many. Youth also tend to view social media as a reliable source of information (Kuyucu, 2014). The issue of social media has become a serious concern for the public in general, and for the university community in particular. Professors and students alike have claimed that social media is affecting their university lives. However, there has been a lack of studies exploring the social media habits and purposes of youth.

Youth engagement with social media has often been dismissed as a waste of time or a mere distraction. Despite the global popularity and rapid growth of social media platforms, there remains a significant gap in research regarding the underlying factors driving youth to engage with these platforms and how they use them in their daily lives. Most existing studies have not fully explored the impact of social media on young people's behavior, social interactions, and well-being. This lack of understanding leaves many questions unanswered about the real impact of social media on youth culture and development. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by identifying the key motivations behind youth engagement with social media, examining the amount of time spent on these platforms, and uncovering the primary social networking sites youth frequent. Additionally, the research aims to identify the challenges youth face in their online interactions. By exploring these factors, the study provided a more comprehensive understanding of how and why young people engaged with social media.

1.2 Research Questions

The research addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the major social networking sites that students engaged with?
2. What are the primary reasons students engaged with social networking sites?
3. How much time did students spend actively using social networking sites each day?
4. What challenges did youth face when using social networking sites?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was situated in mixed methods. Since mixed method is defined as research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data,integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative andquantitative approaches and methods in a single study (Lockyer, 2008), it was preferred. One reason for using mixed methods research is that the use of both qualitative andquantitative approaches will provide a more complete understanding of theresearch problem than either approach alone (Creswell, 2009). Hence, mixedmethods has become the salient method for this study. Mixed methods for providesa means for combining the strengths of both approaches to best understandresearch problems.

There is no universally agreed definition of the youth age group. So, in this study we apply the UN definition in the context of preparations for the International Youth Year (1985) endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 36/28 of 1981 as "youth are those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years". We also take in to account the definition of the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children in its policy issues without any prejudice to any other uses in Ethiopia.

Students of Arba Minch, Wolayta and Hawassa Universities who used the socialmedia actively were the population of the study. However, it was impossible to incorporate all the students in the universities due to lack of time, money, and resources (Marczyk, 2005). The study was meant to look at how students use social media, why they engage with it, the challenges they encounter and how much time they spend on these platforms. Thus, participants were selected using proportional random sampling that presented clear picture of the issue because in random sampling each element would

have equal chance of beingselected was prefered (Tracy, 2013). Hence, sample was selected from each university using proportional random sampling method. Proportional random sampling is important because it makes sure that different groups within a population are fairly represented based on their actual size. This approach helps to avoid bias, leading to more reliable results. It's especially useful when studying diverse populations, as it ensures every group's perspective is considered, making the findings more accurate and meaningful. Probability sampling is the "gold standard" for creating a representative sample (Bernard, 2006; Neuman, 2014). A total of four hunderd fifty students which were selected in randon proportional methid,onehundred fifty students from each university, were selected for the survey.

2.1 Data Collection Tools

Surveys are suitable when a researcher is looking to capture attitudes, opinions, orgain insight into how people behave from large number of people in order todescribe and explain purposes (Franklin, 2013). It can also be conducted in different ways; such as, phone interviews, Internet opinion polls, andvarious types of questionnaires (Neuman, 2014). Survey is flexible and open toresearchers both quantitative and qualitativeapproaches. It also answers wide range of research questions, from the "who" and"what" to the "how" and "why"(Julien, 2008).

The survey included a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions, giving participants the chance to share both specific details and broader insights about their social media habits. This design was chosen to capture a fuller picture of how they engage online. To make the process smoother and more efficient, the survey was conducted online, www.qsurvey.qa., currently down. The online survey allowed for easy data collection, organization, and automatic analysis. This approach has become increasingly popular because it saves time and helps handle large amounts of data effectively (Franklin, 2013; Neuman, 2014). Additionally, the online format made it more convenient for participants, ensuring a broader and more diverse range of responses.

In this study, unstructured interview questions were used to give participants the freedom to share their thoughts openly and naturally. This approach allowed for a more relaxed conversation, helping the researcher gain deeper insights and explored unexpected topics, leading to a fuller and more

authentic understanding of the participants' experiences. This approach is widely used by scholars from both the hermeneutic and positivist traditions, making it versatile for studies that require both qualitative insights and quantitative data (Bernard, 2006). Interviews are invaluable for enriching and adding depth to other data sources, as they allow researchers to explore complex ideas and gain a more nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives (Tracy, 2013). They are particularly essential when direct observation of behavior, emotions, or individuals' interpretations of the world is not feasible. Interviews can also be structured around a fixed set of questions, which helps guide the conversation while still offering opportunities for in-depth responses (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). Additionally, to capture a broader view of social media engagement, texts from social media groups were collected and analyzed. This helped to provide further context and understanding of current trends, behaviors, and the underlying cultural shifts associated with social media use.

2.2 Methods of Data Analysis: Thematic and Descriptive Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify and explore key patterns within the qualitative data. The process involved familiarizing with the data, coding important ideas, grouping codes into themes, and refining them to ensure accuracy. Once the themes were defined, the findings were organized and reported, highlighting their relevance to the research question that provided clear understanding of the data and helped draw meaningful insights (Ayres, 2008; Neuman,2014).

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize and highlight the key features of the dataset. The data was collected and organized, with calculations such as averages, percentages, and standard deviations automatically generated through the online survey platform. These calculations helped reveal important trends. The results were then presented in a clear, easy-to-understand format, often using graphs or tables. This approach provided a comprehensive overview of the data and made it easier to identify key patterns and trends (Neuman, 2014).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, we present and analyze the data collected through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews, using thematic analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to summarize the key features of the dataset, including calculations such as averages, percentages, and standard

deviations, which were automatically generated through the online survey platform. These results are visualized using bar graphs to provide a clearer summary of the data. Out of the 450 questionnaires distributed, 35 were not returned, and 17 were invalid. The remaining were collected and completed.

The analyzed data reveals insights into the social networking sites used by youth, their purposes for engaging with social media, the amount of time spent on these platforms and the challenges they face while using them. Additionally, a search using the keywords "Arba Minch," "Hawassa," and "Wolaita Sodo University students" was conducted. This search led to the discovery of eight Facebook pages linked to the targeted universities. These pages contained information that mirrored content shared on the universities' official social media accounts, such as updates on student registration, details of various activities organized by university departments, and other official announcements. The pages also included content about students socializing and promotional posts related to local resources and business opportunities, serving as informal spaces for students to engage with both university life and the local community.

This section presents the findings from both the surveys and the interviews, offering a comprehensive overview of how students interact with social media, their motivations for using it, and the challenges they encounter.

3.1 Social Networking Sites Engaged by Youth

According to the Technology Acceptance and Use Theory, social media provides users with the opportunity to create and manage public profiles within specific platforms. It enables individuals to connect with friends, family, and others, fostering relationships and interactions. Users can explore their connections and observe how they are linked to others, forming a complex web of relationships. This setup allows for easy sharing of ideas, staying informed, and communicating, all while giving users control over their online presence.

As shown in figure one, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Viber were the most widely used social media platforms among university students in Ethiopia. These platforms cater to various needs and interests of the youth. According to survey respondents, 75.14% used Telegram, 74.02% used Facebook, 32.96% used Messenger, 28.77% used WhatsApp,

14.25% used Instagram, and 10.06% used Viber. This data reveals that Telegram was the most popular platform, with 75.14% of students using it, followed closely by Facebook at 74.02%. This pattern differs from the trends observed in the USA and Nigeria. In Nigeria, the most popular social media platforms are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (Subair et al., 2019). In Ethiopia, however, Telegram stands out as the top choice among university students, followed closely by Facebook. While WhatsApp and Facebook also have strong usage rates in Ethiopia, Telegram is the preferred platform for many.

In the United States, platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Twitter dominate social media usage (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). However, usage patterns among Ethiopian youth differ significantly. While these platforms serve various functions globally, Telegram has become particularly popular in Ethiopia, shaping the way young people interact and consume content, marking a distinct departure from global trends. Each platform serves unique purposes, highlighting the diverse ways people engage with content online. Facebook has consistently been the most popular social media platform, according to numerous studies on youth usage. Research shows that university students, in particular, prefer Facebook for socializing, networking, and sharing content (Sutherland, 2018). Despite the rise of other platforms, Facebook remains the top choice for many young adults.
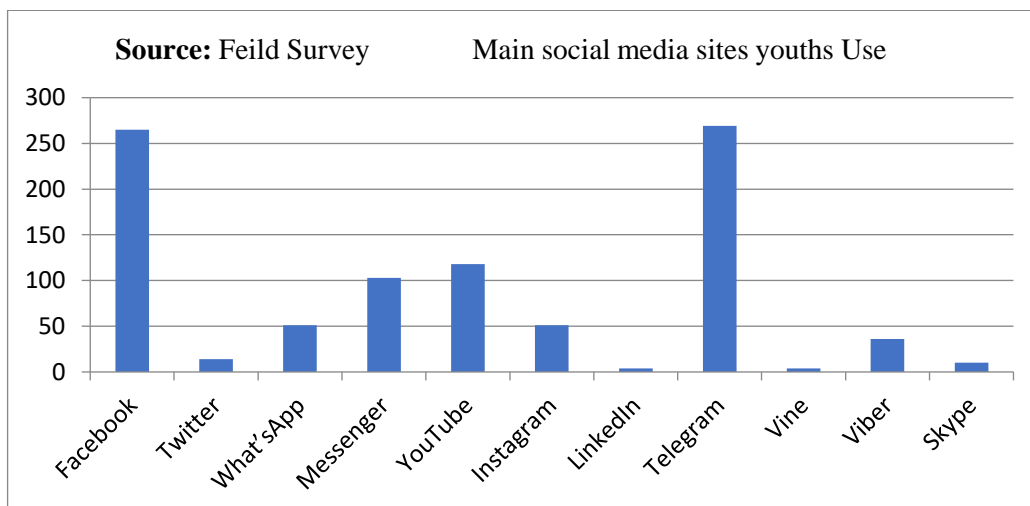

Fig 1: Main social Media Sites Youths Use

However, during the interview, several users shared that they had stopped using Facebook because it had become a toxic environment. They highlighted how the platform was filled with misinformation, hate speech, and divisive discussions, especially on sensitive topics like race, religion, and politics. As Bolaji et al. (2024) discussed, misinformation doesn't just affect social media activity; it also undermines the broader public's trust in the media. The spread of false information can erode confidence in institutions, create division, and sway public opinion. To address this, there needs to be intervention driven by both moral and legal responsibility to keep the public safe. By prioritizing accuracy and truth, media professionals can play a key role in ensuring that information serves as a tool for enlightenment rather than confusion. The constant negativity and misinformation on Facebook made it uncomfortable for many users, prompting them to quit the platform altogether

> Activists write on Facebook to get more likes and comments, boosting traffic, but they never consider what comes after that—the consequences. The stories are often highly sensationalized, which is why I don't feel comfortable engaging on Facebook. (Ahimed Mengistie, Personal Interview 10th May2020)

Another user shared her frustration with Facebook, citing the current political situation in the country as the reason for deactivating her account.

> I terminated my Facebook account because of the political climate. The discussions on Facebook were filled with hatred—hatred based on race, religion, and more. There were also many conflicts happening across the country, and the stories and news posted only seemed to make things worse. The whole situation was disturbing, so I decided to deactivate my account. (Semehal Afera, Personal Interview 10th May2020)

Social media sites are especially popular with young people worldwide because, according to Social Network Theory, users tend to have similar characteristics, such as social status or personal interests. By connecting with others who share these traits, they are more likely to receive similar information and be influenced by the same ideas. This sense of connection creates a feeling of belonging to a community, where trends, news, and opinions can spread easily, and reinforcing users' engagement with the platform (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, 2001).

As the data revealed and informants shared during the interview, young people favor Telegram primarily due to its enhanced security features and the trustworthiness of the information shared on the platform. Many users feel that Telegram offers better privacy protection than other social media

platforms, thanks to its end-to-end encryption and stricter data-sharing policies. Additionally, the platform is seen as more reliable for accessing accurate and authentic information, which is a crucial factor for youth who value privacy and credible sources in their online interactions.

3.2 Why Youths Turn to Social Media: Purposes and Benefits

Participants shared a variety of reasons for their active engagement with social media. Beyond simply viewing posts and chatting with friends, many used these platforms to discuss political issues, voice their opinions, and express themselves. Social media also served as a tool for personal growth, where youths could develop new skills and expand their knowledge. Staying informed about current events, following local news, seeking entertainment, and even shopping were common reasons for using social media. Additionally, it offered a space for young people to connect with new individuals, maintain bonds with family and friends, and pass the time during moments of leisure.

Figure two, below, highlights the number of students and outlines the main reasons why youth in Ethiopia engage with social media.
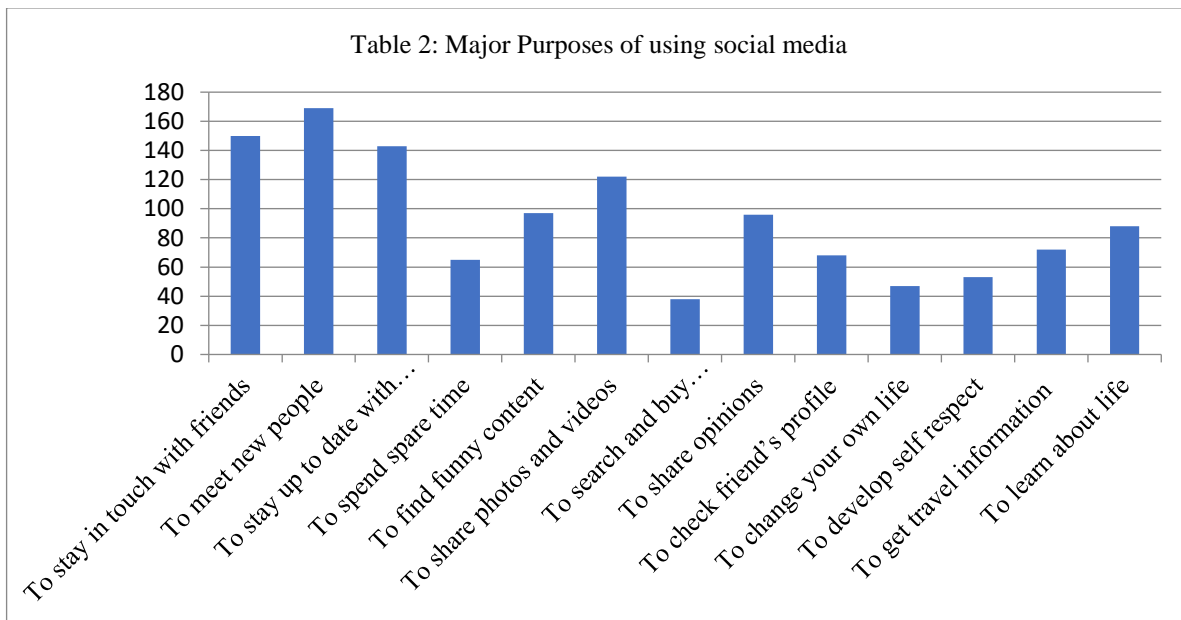

Fig 2: Number of students and major Purposes of using social media

In Ethiopian universities, young people engage with social media for various reasons, often discussing topics like politics, education, news, religion, and music. According to Barnes (2017), social media plays a key role in promoting student engagement, particularly among senior students, by supporting both online and offline social integration. Al-Rahmi (2013) and Osazee-Odia (2017) also emphasized that social media can improve communication and increase classroom participation, especially when used responsibly with effective time management.

The data revealed that university students primarily use social media to establish and maintain relationships, highlighting the importance of social connections and networking with peers and family in both academic and personal aspects of their lives. Education emerged as the leading topic of discussion for youth on social media, with 65.92% of respondents engaged in educational conversations. This trend is likely attributed to the study focusing on university students. Social media has transformed how students access education, enabling them to learn from peers, experts, professors, and professionals worldwide. This shift has moved the focus from competition to collaboration, allowing students to share course materials and participate in global learning. Singh and Guruprasad (2019) also noted that social media has opened up new opportunities for education by facilitating the sharing of resources and promoting collaboration among students.

As mentioned by participants, Telegram stands out as the primary platform for sharing and exchanging educational content. Its ease of use and popularity make it an effective tool for students to support one another in their studies.

> We use social media, primarily Telegram, as a platform for educational purposes. When students require any specific material, they can make a request within the group. A group member who has the requested material will then either share it directly in the group or send it privately via inbox (Amanuel Nigatu, Personal Interview 10th May 2020).

The use of social media for education during the COVID-19 lockdown was crucial for both professors and students. Professors would upload course materials to social media groups, allowing students to download and study while staying at home. Students also shared important materials with their friends and classmates via Telegram. According to students, Telegram groups created virtual classrooms that helped overcome the challenges of physical distance and time constraints. One

student recalled how social media played a key role in supporting the academic process during the lockdown.

> During the COVID-19 lockdown, Telegram became an essential platform for education. Our teachers uploaded teaching materials and assignments to the group channels, and we were able to download the materials and complete the assignments. Telegram was truly invaluable during that time. (Helen Berihe, Personal Interview12th April 2020)

Another student shared his experience of using YouTube as an educational tool during the lockdown. For many students, YouTube also became a valuable resource for self-learning, offering a wealth of content to support their studies outside of the classroom as participant discussed. "I download videos that help me improve my English. I watch videos and practice pronunciation."(Belete Bekele, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for youth, not only in the academic realm but also in helping them discover, nurture, and develop their talents and skills. Beyond academic support, these platforms provided young people with opportunities to explore their personal interests and passions. For many, social media became a space for self-expression and growth. "I prefer Facebook for pages that can help me develop my interest and natural talent in designing."(Helen Berihe, Personal Interview12th April 2020)

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) highlights that social media offers numerous benefits for adolescents and young adults, significantly affecting their personal, social, and even physical lives. With many young people logging onto social media multiple times a day, the internet has become a central space for connecting with friends and meeting new people. It creates opportunities to build social skills, broaden social networks, and nurture creativity, all while promoting open conversations and self-expression (ACOG, 2016).

During the interviews, participants revealed that they often maintain multiple social media accounts for various reasons. One primary reason is the growth of different social networking platforms. As new platforms emerge, young people feel the need to create personal accounts on each one to keep their presence active. Another reason is the desire for both freedom and privacy. Some participants

explained that they create anonymous accounts on the same platform, as this anonymity allows them to engage in more open, candid discussions on a wide range of topics.

> I know a student who has two anonymous Facebook accounts. He writes about serious political issues on both, but in very different ways. On one account, he raises political questions on behalf of a specific ethnic group, while on the other; he posts content that completely opposes the views expressed in the first account. I don't really understand why he does this. (Belete Bekele, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

Below, figure three presented a summary of the number of accounts held by youths.

Source: Feild Survey 2020   Number of Social media accounts youths have

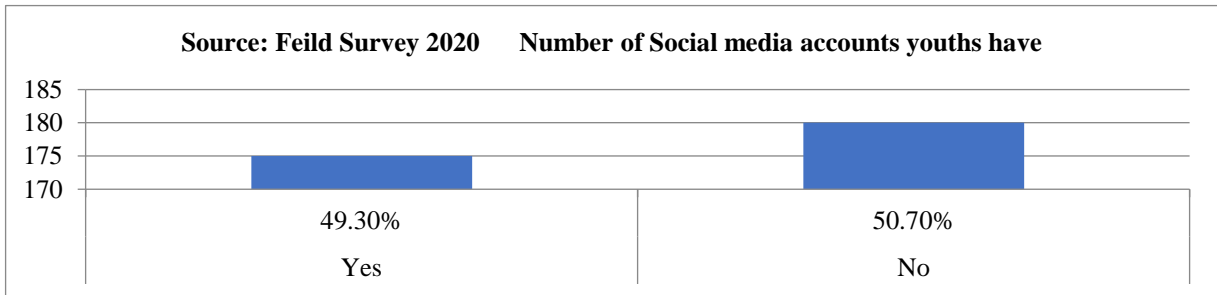|	
49.30%	50.70%
Yes	No

Fig 3. Number of Social media accounts youths have

During the interview, participants explained that anonymity provided a sense of freedom, particularly for those engaged in political discussions. It allowed users to express their views without the fear of immediate repercussions. Many participants shared that, in addition to fearing social pressures and potential attacks from various groups, they also worried about being targeted for their opinions. The fear of intimidation, arrest, or even persecution by the government further drove individuals to create anonymous accounts, offering a layer of protection in an increasingly tense and shriveled online environment.

> I have friends who are deeply interested in politics. When they debate in person, their discussions are direct and heated. However, on social media, they adopt a different approach, often expressing their views through poems or more subtle forms, sometimes even using anonymous accounts. They fear that if they engage in direct and intense discussions online, as they do in person, they could be arrested. (Messay Gezhegn, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

Social media anonymity has provided users with a safe space to openly discuss behaviors that might otherwise be considered deviant or culturally unacceptable. In many cases, openly practicing or even discussing such behaviors in public can result in social alienation, stigmatization, or exclusion from

their peers and community. Social media, however, allows individuals to explore and share these behaviors without the fear of judgment or personal repercussions. Studies have shown that people are more likely to share controversial content anonymously rather than non-controversial content. This behavior is driven by the desire to avoid personal accountability and the potential backlash that might come from sharing divisive or sensitive material online (Smith et al., 2023). The anonymity provided by social media platforms allows individuals to engage in conversations and express viewpoints they might otherwise have kept hidden, enabling them to challenge social norms and voice alternative perspectives in a way that feels safer and more private.

> Our culture does not encourage freedom of thought; it is very conservative. For example, if someone declares themselves an atheist, they are immediately attacked. Even followers of different religions unite against what they consider a "common enemy." In such an environment, remaining anonymous is often the only way to express such opinions and protect individuals from potential harm or backlash. (Tamirat Eshetu, Personal Interview 10th May2020)

According to Social Network Theory, "network cohesion" refers to the degree to which individuals within a group are connected to one another. When a group has strong cohesion, it means its members are closely linked and engage with each other frequently. In the context of social media, research shows that when young people participate on platforms like Facebook or Instagram, they not only reinforce their bonds within small, personal networks but also become part of larger, broader networks. These expanded networks have the power to influence how information and social pressure are transmitted, sometimes altering or moderating the impact of more intimate, face-to-face relationships. Essentially, social media enables young people to connect with a wider world, which can shape their ideas, behaviors, and relationships in ways that go beyond their immediate circle (Ellison et al., 2007).

3.3 The Amount of Time Youth Spend on Social Media

The rise of new media and social networking sites has fundamentally transformed the way we connect with others, particularly when it comes to weak social ties. Research suggests that these platforms enable users to establish connections with individuals from around the world through

features like "add friends," "follow posts," "mention," and "retweet." While some studies indicate that these online connections can help people maintain social relationships and support networks, others question whether they foster deeper or more meaningful civic engagement (Ellison et al., 2007). As social media's influence continues to grow, scholars are reconsidering how we define and understand weak ties in this digital age.

This study shows that social media has become deeply ingrained in the lives of Ethiopian youth, making it increasingly difficult for them to disconnect from these platforms. Many students, in particular, rely heavily on their mobile phones to stay engaged with social media. In-depth interviews revealed strong reactions when participants were asked how they would feel if they were banned from social media. For university students, social media interactions have become a significant part of their daily routines, with some expressing a deep sense of immersion in these digital spaces."Most users are not honest about the fact that they are addicted to social media. Social media has become our life. I spend almost eight hours on it every day." (Bethelihem Getachew, Personal Interview, April 5 2020)

The amount of time young people spend on social media can vary depending on different circumstances. University students, the focus of this study, tend to spend more time on social media when they have free moments, such as during breaks between classes or in the evening after their studies. For many of them, social media becomes a go-to activity when they have some downtime. Below, figure four, highlights the amount of time youth generally spends on social media, offering a clear view of their usage habits.
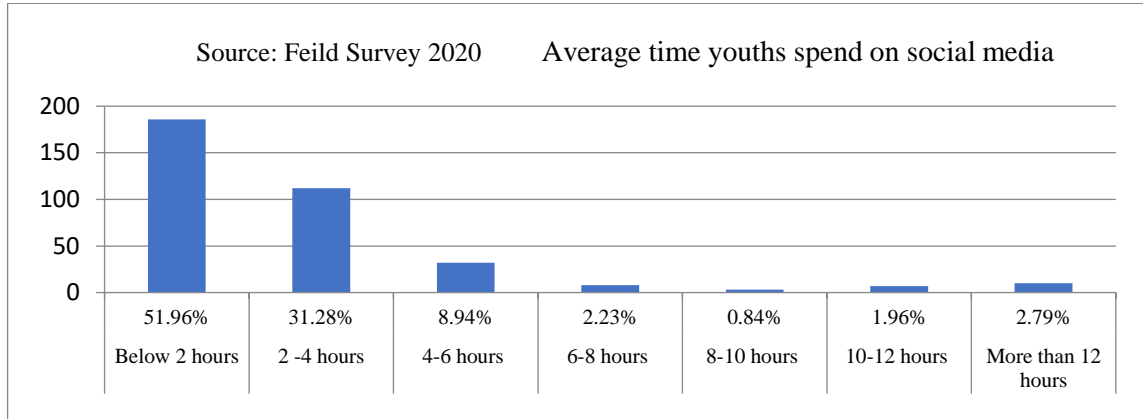
Fig 4: Average time youths spend on social media

However, during the in-depth interviews, participants shared perspectives that somewhat contradicted the survey results. One informant highlighted that social media has become an inescapable part of their lives, deeply embedded in both their social interactions and personal routines. According to the participants, social media is no longer just a casual activity but an essential aspect of their daily lives, influencing how they connect with others and how they navigate their personal experiences.

> It's impossible to disconnect from social media. It's everything these days. No matter where we are, we can stay informed about what's happening all over the world. Social media is what keeps us connected. I would feel suffocated if I were banned from my social media activities. (Ahimed Seid, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020).

This finding aligns with a survey conducted in the United States, which revealed that teenagers spend an average of 4.8 hours per day on social media platforms. Specifically, girls average 5.3 hours daily, while boys spend around 4.4 hours (Statista, 2023). Similarly, Chandrasena and Ilankoon (2022) found that more than half of undergraduates use social media daily for 2 to 5 hours, with most accessing platforms 1 to 10 times per day. These findings reflect similar patterns seen in other studies. Many undergraduates reported that they are motivated to check their favorite social media sites during their free time, in spare moments, and while at university or social events.

3.4 Challenges and Opportunities in Youth Social Media Engagement

Opportunities in Youth Social Media Engagement: Transcendental Intimacy and Fame
New technology has created exciting opportunities for today's youth. Social media platforms, for example, are no longer just places to chat with friends—they offer ways to learn, form meaningful

connections, and even start businesses. According to recent data, many young people are using these platforms to discover and develop their talents, build new skills, and explore creative or entrepreneurial pursuits. This shift shows how digital spaces are becoming an important part of how young people grow, both personally and professionally.

> I have good friends on Facebook who visit me when they come to Arba Minch, and I visit them when I go to Addis. Some of them have good jobs and even offer me support from time to time. My hometown is Woldiya, which is a bit far from Addis. During the COVID-19 lockdown, my Facebook friends sent me newly published books. I don't even know some of them in person, yet Facebook has provided me with a sense of family. (Tamirat Eshetu, Personal Interview 10th May 2020)

This finding aligns with the Office of the Surgeon General (OSG, 2023), which highlights how social media can be an invaluable tool for young people. It provides opportunities to connect with others who share similar interests, identities, and experiences, creating spaces where they can freely express themselves and access important information. Additionally, social media plays a key role in helping youth build and maintain friendships, fostering meaningful connections that support their social growth and overall well-being.

Another participant shared how social media opened up valuable opportunities for their friends to develop and showcase their literary talents, especially in writing poems. Through these platforms, their friends could share their creative work with a broader audience, receive feedback, and connect with others who appreciated their writing. Social media not only provided a space for self-expression but also played a role in building confidence and gaining recognition in their literary pursuits.

> I have friends who are able to actualize their potential. One of my friends writes poems and shares them on Facebook. Some of his followers and friends on the platform encouraged him to publish his work. Eventually, people contributed money, and he was able to publish a book. (Ahimed Mengistie, Personal Interview 10th May 2020)

According to the survey, seventy-four percent (74.30%) of respondents indicated that they knew at least one person who had benefited from their social media engagements. This suggests that social media has had a positive impact on many individuals, helping them gain opportunities, knowledge, or support through their online interactions.

Social media has been used effectively to mobilize users for charitable causes, helping to support those in need. This finding aligns with Social Network Theory, which suggests that innovations, among other things, spread through interactions between individuals or organizations within a social system. The connections between users—whether through friendship, advice, communication, or social support—form a network. As such, the spread of ideas or actions is fundamentally a network-driven process. "My friends on social media, who live in Addis, use these platforms to help others and address humanitarian issues in the Tigray region." (Tamirat Eshetu, Personal Interview 10th May 2020)

Social media has opened up different ways for young people to earn a living and pursue their talents. "A friend of a friend I met once makes 10,000 birr a month from YouTube," said (Kalkidan Hailu, Personal Interview, 5th sApril 2020). Another participant also shared, "I have some friends who are YouTubers—they create entertaining videos, post them, and get paid for it." (Michael Kefelegn Personal Interview 12[th]April 2020)

The findings about the opportunities and challenges of social media provide fresh perspectives on how Social Network Theory could evolve. They offer a deeper understanding of the impact that social media platforms have, particularly in terms of shaping media effects. This research highlights the interplay between both personal (micro) and broader social (macro) structures, and how these influence the flow and filtering of information online. Theories like the two-step flow and diffusion of innovations help explain how messages travel through social networks, while concepts such as opinion leadership and tie strength reveal the key factors that determine how information moves and is received within those networks (Johnson & Smith, 2020).

3.4.1 Challenges in Youth Social Media Engagement: Privacy Breaches and Health Concerns

The data collected shows that social media has become a central part of daily life for young people in Ethiopia. While it offers many benefits, there are also significant challenges, particularly when it comes to how the platform is misused and the negative behaviors that sometimes emerge. As shared by the participants, these issues highlight the need for a more responsible and mindful approach to

social media. It's important to make the most of its positive aspects, while also addressing the risks it can pose, especially for younger users.

> It would be better if people's privacy were respected. I remember hearing about a student whose friends secretly filmed a private moment of hers. When they had a falling out, they posted the video online. Her father saw it, and she couldn't handle the shame and humiliation. Sadly, she ended up taking her own life. (Kalkidan Hailu, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

While social media platforms offer numerous benefits, concerns about their misuse and abuse have grown significantly. In some cases, these issues have even led users to step away from social media altogether. One of the most troubling challenges is the violation of privacy, where individuals share personal photos or videos without the consent or knowledge of those involved. As highlighted by Gahadh Faisal et al. (2022), as technology and social networking continue to evolve, people's lives are becoming more intertwined with the internet. While the internet provides opportunities for learning, communication, and meeting new people, it also exposes individuals and organizations to various risks. This makes it essential for users to be aware of their online presence and understand how to protect themselves.

The breach of privacy underscores a darker side of social media, where the boundary between connection and exploitation can often become blurred. This is consistent with Ayaburi and Treku's (2020) findings, which indicate that privacy on social media is complex due to the involvement of multiple parties and the vast amount of personal information shared. Over time, users may become desensitized to privacy concerns, leading to a gap between their actions and their privacy awareness.

The obsession with social media among young people has resulted in various academic and health-related issues. Many youths struggle with poor academic performance and face mental and physical health challenges due to excessive social media use. In a recent survey, nearly 70.95% of respondents said they knew someone who had faced significant difficulties because of their social media habits. This concern was also echoed by participants during interviews, who shared similar observations about the negative impact of social media obsession on young people's lives. Clearly, while social

media offers numerous benefits, it also presents risks that should not be overlooked, as discussed by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2023).

Harmful content on social media, such as posts promoting self-harm, harm to others, or disordered eating, can have a profound negative impact on young people. It is critical to minimize, report, and remove such content to protect vulnerable individuals. Collaboration between social media platforms, parents, educators, and mental health professionals is essential in creating safer online spaces and offering the support that young people need.

> One of my classmates became deeply obsessed with using social media. The Wi-Fi access point was very close to his dorm, so he always had a strong internet connection. As a result, he was online almost all the time. Unfortunately, he struggled to manage this, staying up late at night and having trouble waking up in the morning. He often missed his early classes and, eventually, even missed tests and a final exam. Ultimately, his lack of focus and poor time management led to his dismissal from the school. (Belete Bekele, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

Another respondent whose friend faced health problem also described what happened. "I have friends who were highly addicted to social media, spending time online constantly. This eventually led to psychological issues, and they were ultimately compelled to seek help from health professionals to overcome their problems." (Ahimed Mengistie, Personal Interview 10th May 2020)

The Office of the Surgeon General (OSG, 2023) similarly highlighted the potential complications arising from excessive social media use. Prolonged engagement with social media can harm the health and well-being of children and adolescents. Many platforms are intentionally designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible, which can result in unhealthy habits and disrupt the balance needed for a healthy lifestyle. This constant connection to social media can interfere with sleep, reduce physical activity, and make it difficult for young people to engage in meaningful face-to-face interactions—all of which are crucial for their growth and development.

Social media has also become a tool for promoting and reinforcing socially and culturally unacceptable behaviors, including violations of privacy. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) (2016) emphasized the dangers associated with behaviors such as sexting,

which involves sending sexually explicit messages or images through mobile devices. One of the major risks of sexting is that these images may be shared unintentionally, leading to short-term embarrassment. However, the repercussions can last much longer, as such images can affect future educational and career opportunities due to the enduring nature of these digital footprints.

In addition, many young people face challenges in fully understanding media practices and lack the critical skills necessary to navigate social media platforms effectively. As discussed by Alex Koohang et al. (2021), unregulated and unaware use of social media can lead to health problems and negatively affect academic performance. It is important for social media users to be aware of the risks and dangers associated with their privacy and security online. This awareness helps them recognize potential harm or loss that could occur if their personal information is not protected.

> The government should regulate hate speech and content that isn't beneficial for the younger generation. Since technology is unavoidable, it could harm future generations. Therefore, corrective and educational measures should be implemented as a form of punishment. (Bethelihem Getachew, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

Social media has increasingly become a key source for staying updated on important national issues. According to the survey data, 63.41% of respondents turn to social media to stay informed. As a result, it is crucial for social media administrators to be mindful of the information they share. This responsibility is especially important for protecting young users from potential risks and dangers, a concern highlighted by participants during in-depth interviews.

> Social media group admins shouldn't focus only on personal use. They should have a clear purpose and plan for their contributions when creating a group. Mainstream media should also support social media figures who aim to benefit and help society. (Kalkidan Hailu, Personal Interview, 5th April 2020)

In addition to the responsibility of social media administrators, developing users' media literacy is essential, as emphasized by Abdul Latif et al. (2024). Their research underscores the importance of media literacy in shaping how individuals understand and engage with content on social media. Media literacy helps users assess whether the information they encounter is reliable and accurate. Those who are skilled in media literacy are better at identifying fake news and are less likely to be

misled by exaggerated or misleading stories. By strengthening critical media literacy, individuals can make more informed decisions about what they read, share, and trust online.

However, without these skills, users who blindly accept information from social media are more vulnerable to misinformation. Kyung-Sun Kim et al. (2014) pointed out that while undergraduate students often use multiple social media platforms to find information, they also rely on traditional methods, such as checking disclaimer notes, to assess the quality of content. Despite these strategies, it remains unclear how effective these approaches are in truly safeguarding against misinformation.

The key findings from this study—ranging from preferred social media platforms and the purposes for engagement to the opportunities and challenges associated with their use—offer valuable insights into Social Network Theory and the Theory of Use and Acceptance of Technology. Specifically, a key takeaway from applying Social Network Theory is that young people engage with social media for informal interactions and social activities, to broaden their participation in discussions, to actively involve new members, and to develop essential social support skills. These platforms also encourage respectful listening and openness to addressing various problems, further enhancing the dynamic between social networks.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, this study reveals that social media has become an essential part of the lives of young people in general and university students in particular in Ethiopia, offering a wide range of benefits and opportunities. Platforms like Telegram have gained popularity due to their ease of use and the advantages they offer, making them the preferred choice for many youths. Social media has become a vital source of both academic and personal knowledge, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown, helping youths share educational resources and support each other in learning. It also fosters cooperative learning, giving youths the chance to work together and exchange ideas.

In addition to its educational value, social media provides an outlet for youths to develop their talents, connect with others, and even earn income. It allows for the creation of virtual friendships, some of

which extend into the real world, and gives youths the chance to mobilize online communities for important social causes. At the same time, social media allows for the expression of political and personal views, sometimes anonymously, but this anonymity can also expose youths to risks, including inappropriate content and harmful interactions.

However, the study also highlights some significant challenges. Many youths lack the critical skills needed to evaluate the information they encounter online, often taking what they see on social media at face value. This can make them vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, which can have serious consequences. Unregulated use of social media also brings other problems, such as academic struggles and health issues, underscoring the need for balanced and mindful engagement.

The findings align with the Theory of Use and Acceptance of Technology, which suggests that social media serves three main purposes for users: self-expression, social networking, and sharing information. Yet, while social media has many positive aspects, this study emphasizes the importance of being aware of the risks and responsibilities that come with its use. As social media continues to play a major role in youths' lives, understanding both its benefits and challenges is crucial for fostering a safer and more responsible online environment.

4.2 Recommendations

Given the significant role social media plays in the lives of young people, it is important to take steps to ensure its responsible use. First, youths should be encouraged to manage their time on social media to avoid excessive use and its negative impacts. Setting boundaries around social media time can help create a balance, allowing for other activities and face-to-face interactions that are essential for well-being. Social media group administrators also carry a heavy responsibility in managing the content shared within their groups. They should carefully consider the messages they allow, making sure they promote positivity and contribute to the group's purpose. Alongside this, mainstream media should be more selective in promoting social media influencers, prioritizing those who can have a positive influence on youth and society.

Government intervention is also needed to regulate and prevent misuse or harmful behaviors on social media. This includes addressing issues like cyber bullying, misinformation, and the spread of

harmful content. By taking a proactive approach, the government can help create a safer environment for young people online. Furthermore, as social media has led to a decline in face-to-face interactions, it's crucial to encourage youths to spend more time engaging with one another in person. This will help restore the social bonds that are often weakened by online communication. Social media can also expose young people to content that conflict with moral and cultural values, so it's important for authorities to ensure that harmful content is filtered, fostering a more respectful online space.

Finally, influential figures like university professors, community leaders, and mentors should guide youths in using social media in ways that benefit their personal, educational, and professional growth. By coming together and taking responsibility, these stakeholders can help maximize the positive impact of social media while minimizing its risks, ensuring that it remains a constructive tool for the younger generation.

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