



Investigating the Impact of Social Media Usage on the Mental Health of Young Adults in Buffalo City, South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, social media usage has consistently increased over time, with young individuals being the most active users. However, there are concerns about mental illness, such as depression, as a result of the surge in social comparison. This study explored the relationship between social media usage and mental health among young adults in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. This study used a quantitative research approach and was based on the positivism paradigm. Data was collected from 127 young individuals aged 14 to 35 who live in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality through the use of structured questionnaires. The data collected was analysed using a descriptive statistical package for the social sciences. The findings of the study amongst others showed that the young adults spend an average of 6 hours per day on social media platforms. Also, the fear of missing out (FoMO) was identified as another major reason why young adults stay on social media platforms for long hours every day. Based on the results presented in this study, one can convincingly state that the excessive use of social media is negatively contributing to the mental health status of young adults. Some of these detrimental impacts include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicide and other mental health issues. The study recommends amongst others that an urgent and continuous well-structured awareness campaign be made to help sensitise the young adults on the danger of excessive use of social media platforms, both on their mental health status and life in general.

Keywords: *Fear of Missing Out; Mental Health; Social Media; Suicide; Young Adults*

Introduction

According to a 2019 report by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), over 12 million South Africans use 4G/LTE devices. In another report on internet statistics in South Africa by "We are Social", the number of internet users between January 2019 and January 2020 increased from 30.8 million to 36.5 million. Young adults are among the most active users of social media, with about 95% of them owning or having access to a smartphone, up 25% from 2014-2015. (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) In 2018, the number of young adults who use the internet "nearly constantly" increased to 45%, with another 44% saying they use it "many times a day" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

According to Galal (2022) by 2026, the projected South African internet users who use social media will reach 64 percent. In a review of research, Strickland (2014) found that the average American young adult spends 3.8 hours a day on social media networks with one in five young adults using social media up to six hours a day. As the usage of social media among young adults grows, it is displacing time spent on other social and developmental activities such as reading books, periodicals, and newspapers, watching television, engaging in non-sedentary habits, and chatting with people face-to-face (Twenge et al., 2018).

Social media can have good effects on a young adult's well-being, including offering a sense of support, particularly emotional support. Users may be able to receive helpful remarks, likes, develop empathy, or connect with others who are dealing with similar problems (McCall, 2021). Many young adults use social media for self-expression and to interact with like-minded communities, according to Spies Shapiro and Margolin (2014).). Social media provides an access to information, which includes current events knowledge, politics, and discovering health information. Some of the reported benefits of social media use include sharing health issues, requesting health information or guidance, and texting health providers (Kennedy, 2019).

One of the trends associated with the rise in major depressive episodes, according to (Mojtabai et al., 2016), is the improper usage of mobile phones and social media applications. Young adult females were more affected by social media use than males, according to South African Depression and Anxiety Group, with the negative consequences being caused by three factors: regular use of social media hurt their health by leading to insufficient sleep, insufficient physical exercise, and exposure to cyberbullying. Approximately half of young adults say they monitor social media and are online almost continuously, up from 24% in 2015 (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Young adult's loss of quality and quantity of sleep is linked to their use of social media and the internet, particularly before bed (Muzaffar et al., 2018). Young adults who get less than six hours of sleep per night are three times more likely to consider or attempt suicide, according to Weaver et al. (2018), while other studies have found links between lack of sleep and anxiety, anger, drug use, and depression (Muzaffar et al., 2018).

According to South African Depression and Anxiety Group, suicide accounts for almost 9% of all young adult deaths in South Africa, and it is the second largest and fastest-growing cause of mortality among young South Africans aged 15 to 25. Increased levels of anxiety and despair, particularly on image-driven platforms like Facebook and Instagram, have also been connected to social media use as a source of negative well-being outcomes (PresidentAnteater547, 2018). Cyberbullying has been demonstrated to have a higher link to suicide attempts than face-to-face bullying (Kuehn, 2018). Walsh (2017) observed that passively viewing social media sites like Facebook and Instagram reduced young adults' self-worth, whereas Beyens et al. (2016) discovered that surfing social media news feeds was associated with a specific sort of anxiety known as fear of missing out (FoMO).

Research has shown that in young adults who are between the ages of 18 and 25, brain development and maturation continue and result in increased cognitive, emotional, and social abilities (Hochberg & Konner, 2020). Social media is playing an increasingly important part in this stage of brain development and maturation. Areas of well-being influenced by social media, such as sleeping patterns, psychological health, and mental health, are some of the elements that influence brain development in young adults (Sharma et al., 2013).

Although previous studies have showed interest in social media such as finding a strong link between heavy social media usage and an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts (Robinson & Smith, 2022), there has been however, limited empirical studies on linking social media usage to mental health among young adults especially in South African urban cities. Hence, this study aims to increase knowledge on the effects of social media usage on the mental health status of young adults, using Buffalo city as a case study.

The next section of this paper presents a review of related research studies followed by a section that explains the research methodology employed in the study. Consequently, data analysis and results of study investigations are presented and discussed in the subsequent section. The last section of the paper concludes and provides recommendations of the study.

Related Works on Social Media Usage and Its Impacts

According to a survey conducted by Asmal (2022), there are more than 30 million active social media users in South Africa and the number keeps on growing. Based on their study, Facebook stands out to be the most popular with nearly all social media users having an account. This is followed by YouTube: 25,3 million; LinkedIn: 10,2 million; WhatsApp 9,9 million, Instagram: 6,8 million; TikTok: 6,4 million and Twitter: 2,85 million. Table 1 shows the distribution of users according to age groups. From the Table 1, it is clear that the most active users are young adults representing 66 percent of usage.

Table 1: Social media stats in South Africa in 2022 (Asmal, 2022)

Age group	% of Total Social Media Users in SA
13 - 17	9.5%
18 - 24	27.1%
25 - 34	29.4%
35 - 44	17.9%
45 - 54	7.1%
55 - 64	3.5%
65+	5.5%

In this study, young adults are those in the age range of 14 to 35 years (Office of the Deputy President, 1998). Social media usage comes with a number of negative issues that may have a direct impact on users, especially young adults. The following section discusses some negative aspects of social media usage.

Young adults are disproportionately at risk of developing mental health issues. Park et al. (2014) argue that social media applications such as Facebook are positively associated with acculturative stress among young adults. Similarly, Bashir and Bhat (2017) conducted a thorough analysis on the impact of stress on young adult's mental health and concluded that stress had a detrimental impact on young adult's mental health. As a result, it can be deduced that excessive use of social media can have a negative impact on the mental health of the younger generation. Most of the existing research on social media and mental health focused on Facebook and Instagram. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one out of every five young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 will have a mental illness. Eleven percent (11%) of people with mental illnesses will experience a mood disorder like depression or bipolar disorder, and 8% will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder such as GAD, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or social anxiety disorder (NAMI, 2022).

A conundrum of social media use is positioned by Bashir and Bhat (2017). On one hand Bashir and Bhat (2017) states that the more time people spend on social media, the more miserable they get. On the other hand, he claims that using social networking applications like Facebook and Twitter helps students stay focused and less worried. Socialisation, better communication, learning opportunities, and access to health information are some of the positive effects of social media on young adult mental health Bashir & Bhat (2017). The use of social media is a rapidly growing phenomena in the recent past two decades. Around 7 out of 10 people in the United States use social media to interact with others, receive

news, share information, and entertain themselves (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Young people use social media for a number of reasons that include amusement, identity construction, social enhancement (improving offline social status through online contacts), and sustaining interpersonal ties (Ifinedo, 2016). Such applications may hold promise in compensating for the decline in face-to-face social interaction and the attendant economic, social, and health consequences (Antoci et al., 2015). According to studies, social media can give people a platform to interact and reconnect with others regardless of location or time. Social connection is one of the most clearly recognised benefits of social media use. According to a recent study by Nesi (2020), 77% of young adults indicated that social media was important for keeping up with friends daily, and 69% said it was important for having meaningful talks with close friends. Young adults commonly refer to interacting with friends and family as a main benefit of social media although previous research has shown that using social media to build a sense of acceptance or belonging improves people's well-being (Nesi, 2020).

To be mentally healthy, humans require face-to-face contact. Eye-to-eye contact with someone who cares relieves stress and improves mood faster and more efficiently. A person is more likely to acquire or exacerbate mood disorders like anxiety and depression if he or she prioritises social media activities over in-person relationships (Robinson & Smith, 2022). Another concern related with young adult social media use is social comparison. Individuals regularly use social media to depict themselves in a positive manner, resulting in a flood of messages and photographs that are often deliberately planned to portray users in a positive light. This may lead to negative social comparisons about one's own accomplishments, abilities, or beauty among certain youngsters. Higher levels of online social comparison have been linked to depressed symptoms in young adults, while appearance-specific comparisons on social media have been linked to an increased risk of disordered eating and body image problems (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021).

In the mid-2000s, as social media became more popular, the mental health of young adults and young adults in the United States began to deteriorate (Twenge et al., 2018). For example, between 2008 and 2018, the overall number of people aged 18–23 who reported having a major depressive episode in the previous year grew by 83 percent (NSDUH, 2019). Suicides, nevertheless, increased in frequency over the same time period and are currently the second highest cause of death among people aged 15 to 24 (NIMH Information Resource Center, 2020). Although the exact origins of these developments are uncertain, experts have speculated that the widespread usage of social media may be a significant contributor (Twenge, 2020). Fear of missing out (FoMO) is a concept that has been around long before social media existed but sites like Facebook and Instagram seem to amplify thoughts by many users that they are missing out on what others are doing, buying or speaking about. There is a perceived sense that others are having more fun or enjoying better lives (Przybylski et al., 2013). The feeling that you are missing out on something can lower your self-esteem, cause worry, and encourage you to use social media even more.

Use of technology has also been linked to impairing sleep patterns of young adults (Hoyt et al., 2018). The National Sleep Foundation (<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/>) recommends between 8 and 10 hours of sleep each night. Over 70% of young adults in the United States are getting less than eight hours of sleep each night, with 15% getting under 6 hours Weaver et al. (2018). Sleep, or lack thereof, is directly linked to mental health problems. According to South African Depression and Anxiety Group (<https://www.mhinnovation.net/organisations/south-african-depression-and-anxiety-group-sadag>), young adult in South Africa experienced harmful effects being driven by three factors: frequent use of social media harmed their health by leading to inadequate sleep; inadequate physical activity; and exposing them to cyberbullying. Notably, 40% of young adults say they use a mobile device within five minutes of going to bed, and 36% say they wake up at least once during the night to check their gadget. Thus, the impact of social media on sleep quality remains a primary risk for subsequent mental health concerns among young adults and is an important area for future studies (Nesi, 2020).

Research Methodology

Considering the epistemological perspective, the study was conducted within the positivist research paradigm and used a quantitative research approach in order to investigate the effects of social media use on the mental health status among young adults in the Buffalo City Municipality. The motivating factor in the use of this approach was that it provided a broader perspective on the research and is founded on well-established research procedures such as the scientific method of enquiry (Choy, 2014).

In this study, a sample data of 127 young individuals aged 14 to 35 around the Buffalo City Municipality was realised through the use of a probabilistic data collection procedure. This procedure involved a survey with the use of questionnaires as a data collection tool which was administered through the use of Google forms and respondents submitted their responses online. In order to ensure that respondents articulate their views and opinions on the matter raised in the study, the questionnaire was designed to include both open and closed ended type of questions which were focused on collecting demographic data, usage of social media and views about the impact social media has on mental health status. The data collected was analysed using a descriptive statistical package for the social sciences.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the findings on the effects of social media on the mental health status among youths in the Buffalo City. The findings were presented using two research questions; the state of the social media usage among the youth and the impacts of social media usage on the mental health status of the youths. The data is assembled and presented in the form of descriptive statistics and graphs. Table 2 shows the respondents demographic details, where 63% of the respondents were female and 37% were male. It further shows that the majority of the respondents are between the ages 18 and 25 years. The data was only collected from this age group since the study focuses on young adults. Table 2 also shows that all the respondents own at least one smartphone with internet connectivity.

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic Details

Respondents demographic profile where: n = 127, frequency = f and n = total number of respondents

Item	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage
Gender	Male	47	37%
	Female	80	63%
	Total (n)	127	100%
Age (Years)	14 - 17	15	12%
	18 – 25	105	83%
	26 – 35	7	5%
	Total (n)	127	100%
Ownership of smartphone	Yes	127	100%
	No	0	0%
	Total (n)	127	100%
Access to Internet connectivity	Yes	127	100%
	No	0	0%
	Total (n)	127	100%

Research Question 1: What is the state of social media usage among the young adults in Buffalo municipality?

This question aims to uncover the extent of the social media platforms usage among the young adults in Buffalo Municipality. Figure 1 depicts the number of social media accounts owned by the individual respondents. It can be observed that 97% of the respondents own more than one social media account, while only 3% of the respondents have one social media account.

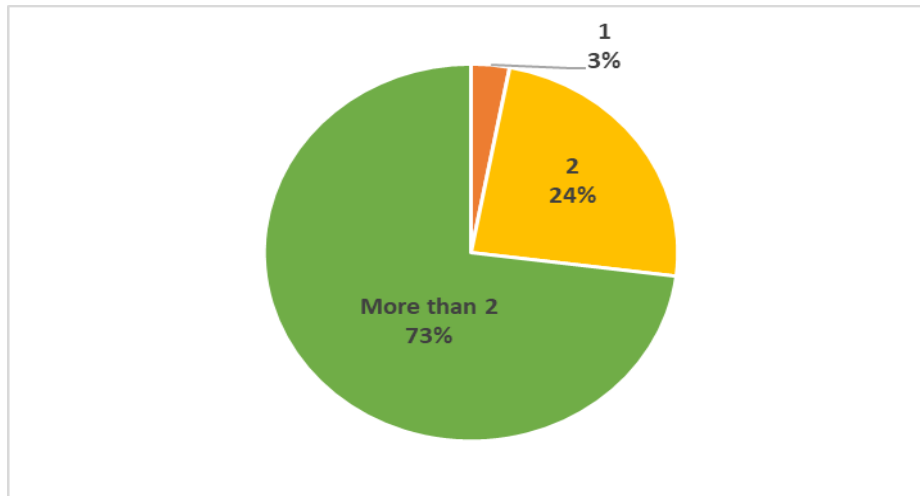


Figure 1: Number of social media accounts owned by individual

Figure 2 depicts the most used percentage of different social networking platforms. It can be observed that 68% of the respondents use WhatsApp more than any other social networking platforms. This usage level can be attributed to factors such as low data consumption and easy voice and video call facilities that come with WhatsApp as compared to other platforms. Figure 2 also shows that 25% use Facebook mostly, while 5% mostly use Instagram. However, only 2% of the respondents indicate that they use Twitter more than any other social networking platforms. One of the reasons for Twitter’s low result could be attributed to the way many users use harsh and derogatory words while tweeting.

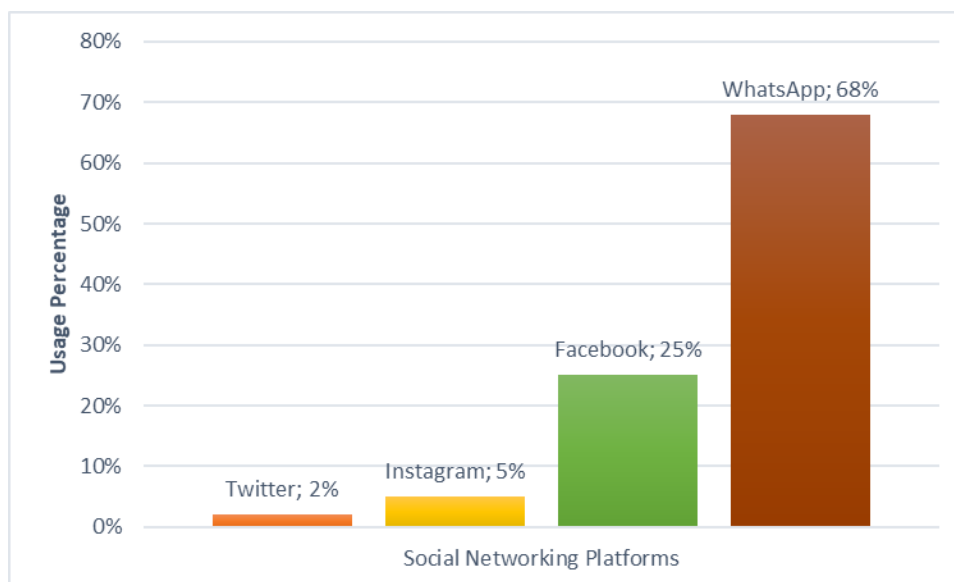


Figure 2: Most Used Social Networking Platform

Figure 3 depicts the average hours spent by the respondents on social networking platforms each day. The figure shows that 36% of the respondents spend between 5 to 7 hours per day on social media, 38% spend from 8 to 12 hours. While 23% of the respondents spend less than 5 hours each day on social media platforms. However, 3% indicate that they use more than 12 hours on social media platforms per day. Using more than 8 hours a day on social media is quite alarming, as this could lead to some problems. Hence, this study investigates further by exploring the impacts of these social media usages on the mental health of the young adults.

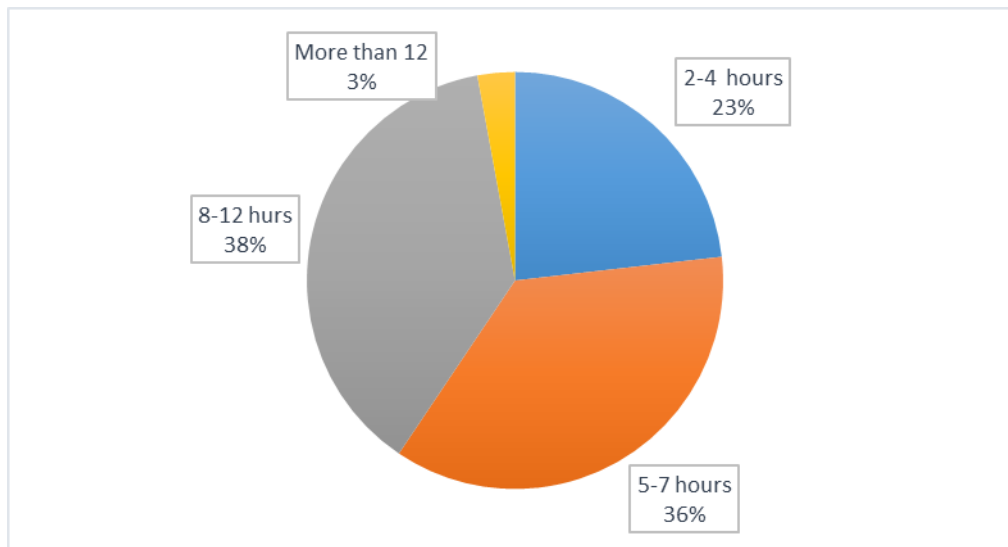


Figure 3: Average Hours Spent Each Day on Social Networking Platforms

Research Question 2: What are the impacts of social media use on the mental health status of young adults in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality?

This research question aims to uncover the effects of social media use on mental health status of young adults in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. Figure 4 shows the impact of social media usage on sleep deprivation among the young adults. It can be observed that 83% of the respondents indicated that social media has a significant influence in sleep deprivation. Which contributes to a number of negative impacts in an individual's mental health status. However, despite the 83% agreement that social media is negatively affecting sleep, they still spend at least 6 hours a day on different social media platforms. Also, 17% of the respondents do not agree that social media play a role in sleep deprivation.

Figure 5 depicts the impact of social media on the "Fear of missing out (FoMO)". FoMO is an idea where the social media users try to determine the level of success of their friends or connections based on whatever it has been displayed on the connections/friend's social media pages. 78% of the respondents believe that their social media acquaintances are having more fun or living a better life than they are, because of the pictures, videos and statuses they post on their social networking profiles. While 22% disagreed that their friend's social media posts have no impact on them or how they feel. This data has indicated that the FoMO have some detrimental impacts on how young adults see themselves in comparison with their social media friends. Some of these detrimental impacts include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and other mental health issues.

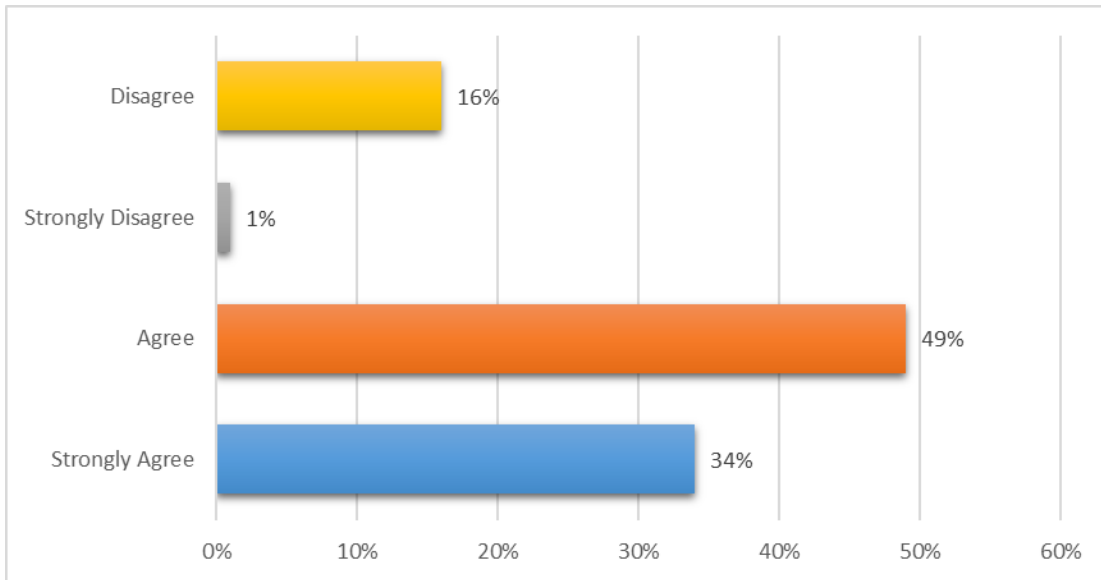


Figure 4: Usage of social media and its role in sleep deprivation

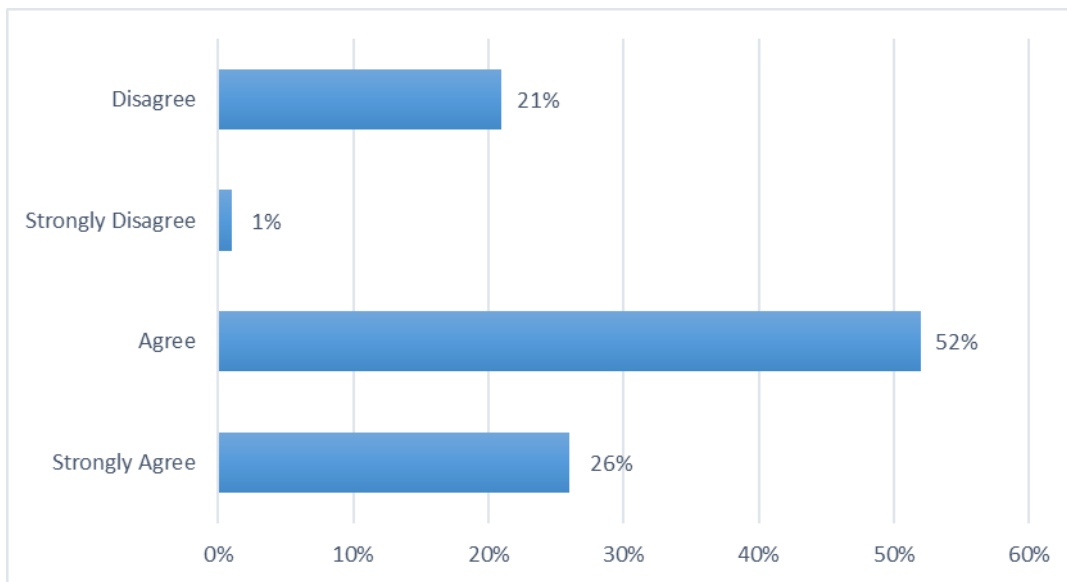


Figure 5: Social media impact on Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

As social media grows in popularity and usage, the level of young adults' addiction to social media could worsen, which in turn could increase their health risk. Figure 6 shows the level of social media addiction among young adults. It can be observed that 97% of the respondents agree that social media addiction may worsen among the younger generation in the near future. This result aligns to the results presented earlier, where it was observed that the majority of the young adults spend more than 6 hours per day on social media because of FoMO, which in turn leads to sleep deprivation and addiction problems. Based on the results presented in Figures 3 to 6, the younger generation needs to be well educated about the dangers of excessive social media usage, so as to protect their mental health status.

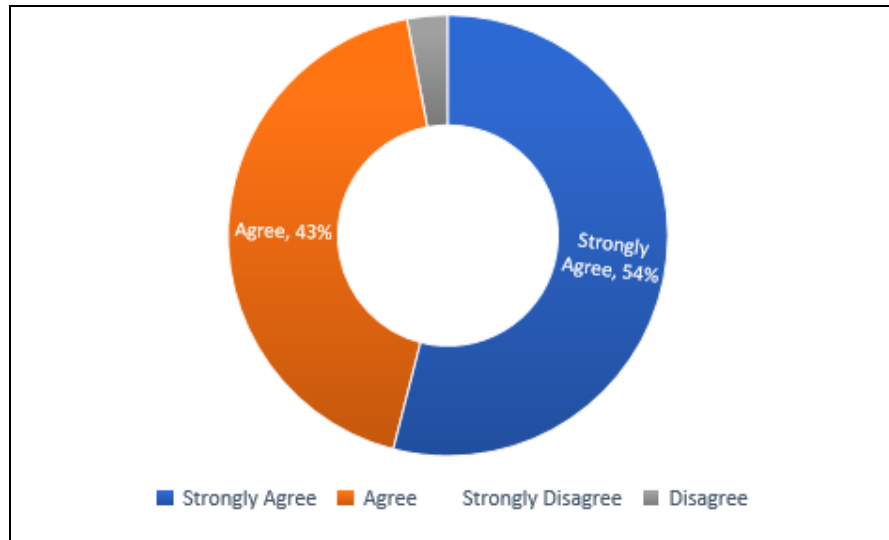


Figure 6: Social media usage addiction

Figure 7 shows the impact of social media on young adults' suicide rate. 84% of the respondents agree that the social media has contributed to an increase in the young adult suicide cases in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and South Africa as a whole over the recent past years. The reason for this result could be attributed to the content and the bullying one gets to be exposed to on these social networking platforms. Although 16% of the respondents do not agree that social media has an impact on the suicide increasing numbers. However, based on the results presented in this study, one can convincingly state that the excessive use of social media is negatively contributing to the mental health status of young adults. Hence, an urgent and continuous well-structured education is required among the young adults on the danger of excessive use of social media platforms, both on their mental health status and life in general.

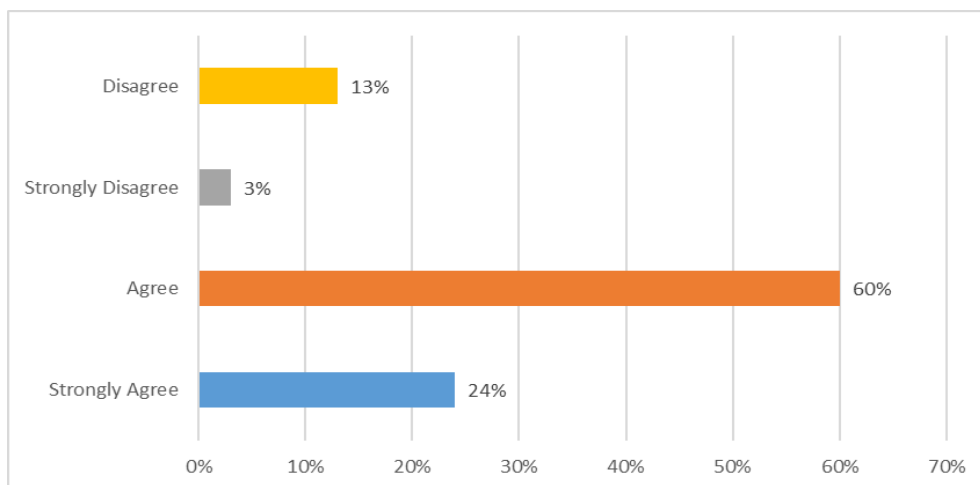


Figure 7: Social media influence on the number of young adults committing suicide

Conclusion and Recommendations

The overall goal of this study was to uncover the effects of social media use on the mental health status of young adults in South Africa, more specifically in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. The findings from this study revealed that excessive usage of social media appears to be contributing towards a negative and detrimental effect on the mental health status among young adults in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. Eighty-four percent of respondents believed social media played a role in the rise of mental health concerns among young adults in the Eastern Cape and South Africa. A majority of respondents claimed they spend more than 7 hours per day on social media networks and an average of 8-12 hours per day staring at their gadget screens, indicating that they have less time for face-to-face engagement, reading a book, or exercising. Social media use, according to 83% of the respondents, has a major impact on sleep deprivation. The majority of respondents (78%) said they occasionally feel like their friends are having more fun and living better lives than they are. The study found that social media plays a huge role in sleep deprivation among young adults and the fear of missing out (FoMO) has a detrimental impact on their self-esteem and causes symptoms of depression and anxiety. Ninety-seven of respondents believe that social media addiction is likely to worsen among the younger generation. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a link between high social media usage and negative mental health issues.

Sequel to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- That the higher education institutions in partnership with the community organizations embark on an urgent and continuous awareness campaign to help sensitise the young adults on the danger of excessive use of social media platforms, both on their mental health status and life in general.
- That the high school life skills curriculum be amended to include the pros and cons of usage of social media platforms.
- That the mental health practitioners and health care providers are sensitised of the potential dangers that social media has on young adults so that they prescribe the most effective and appropriate support to young adults.

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