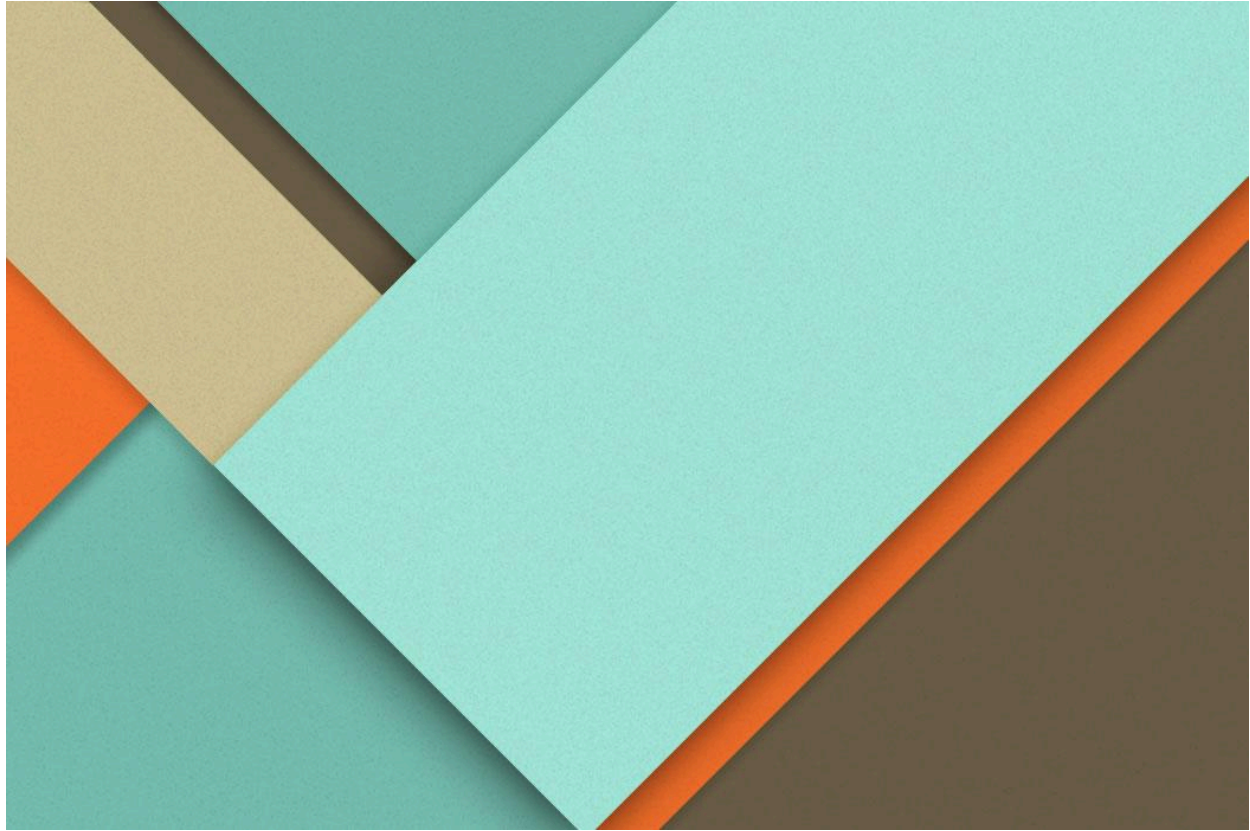# How does social media affect

young people's faith?

by Josh Gale

Academic year 2023-24

BA (Hons) Practical Theology (Community Youth Work)

How does social media affect young people's faith?

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Birmingham Newman University

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Abstract

This is a study that aims to answer the question How does social media affect young people's faith? There are three main focuses which have stirred my study and research: What causes young people to use social media, What are the effects of social media on young people, and how do these effects impact their faith? The importance of this research and study lies in the hands of youth workers, teachers, parents and any practitioner that deals with teaching and developing young people. Social media is an intrinsic part of the lives of young people, so understanding the subject at hand will equip us with the knowledge and understanding to teach better, and equip and grow the young people we work with. The research for this study is done in the form of a literature review, followed by some primary research conducted by myself through surveys and interviews. The results from this research have been analysed, reviewed and discussed which has led to these key conclusions. Social media platforms target young people by giving them a sense of disconnect and 'fear of missing out', which creates a need to be consistently using social media to prevent disconnect. This usage to meet the needs of entertainment, social interaction, news and information and FOMO within young people generates a dependency on social media for these needs, making it extremely hard to break this usage cycle. The effects of this usage on young people are both positive and negative. It can cause addictive character traits, varying emotional swings, lack of focus and lack of motivation. But it causes young people to be entertained, well-informed on the events of the world, and more socially in tune. These positive and negative effects have impacts on their faith. The distraction and lack of motivation can bring about a distraction and motivation within the young people's devotional rhythms. But social media also creates a platform for an easier way to share faith and be encouraged by the faith of others. What these findings mean is that we must take this knowledge and help young people learn how to conduct a healthy usage of social media, while also learning how we as practitioners can think of new ways to engage with the 'digital natives' of this generation,

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Introduction to study

In the modern era of post-Christendom and technological dominance, a question we can ask ourselves is, 'How does this new world affect us?' In the current state of society, we are beset from all sides by things that want to steal our focus and our attention. Social media can be included in this. Since the launch of Twitter and Facebook in 2005/6 we have seen social media explode into popularity, and now, just under two decades later, it is an integral part of the way our society operates. We all fall victim to picking up our phones, opening up one of the many social platforms that are readily available to us and carving out an unexpected five minutes to an hour on there. We pick up the phone 'instinctively' and we stay on the apps 'addictively' until something takes us out of our focused sessions on social media. And because this is something that is part of our everyday lives, social media is changing the way we communicate and the way we are perceived, both positively and negatively. (Turkle, 2011) The positive and negative effects have an impact on how we go about our daily lives and how we interact with our faith.

The adult generation, who were born before Gen Z, had a lot of their cognitive development and even faith formation happen in their childhood, which was before social media fully hit the mainstream as seen today. Young people and children of Gen Z and onwards have experienced social media from a young age intensely, which causes them to be classified as 'digital natives'. The BBC reported that App Annie produced a study that shows that the average time spent on mobile apps was four hours and 48 minutes, up 30% from 2019 (BBC 2022). For our young people, this has been happening mostly every day, every week, every month, and every year of their lives since they were competent enough to operate a phone. This might have a large impact on their cognitive growth and, therefore, change the way they interact with faith. This is the main aim of my study, to gain an understanding of these effects and the impact they may cause.

This ultimately leads to my main goal, the way it affects their faith. This is why the main overarching question for this study is **'How does social media affect young people's faith?'** so that when we understand this question, we as a church and as youth leaders, teachers, parents, and others can learn to shape how we do our youth work, our care, and our education based around these facts and understanding.

I think this study is incredibly important for those who interact with new generations of young people and children who have been moulded from an early age by social media. Knowing about social media also allows us to gain a greater understanding of the culture of young people. Danah Boyd tells us that studying youth culture helps us understand the broader culture. Studying social media helps us understand young people. (Boyd, 2014) Learning how young people function will allow us, as practitioners, to interact with them more effectively.

To make this study more precise and focused, rather than trying to tackle one main objective, I shall break down my main aim into some sub-aims and objectives. These are made up of three questions that I will try to answer throughout this study.

- What causes young people to use social media?
- What are the effects of social media on young people
- How do these effects impact their faith?

It is out of scope to try and then create a new way of running youth work, school curriculums, or parental advice because of these understandings. The aim is that based on this small study, people would be inspired to take these studies further and deeper and, off the back of it, learn how to create a better way of doing youth work or children's work within churches or even in a secular society such as school or at home.

To create the initial foundations of my understanding for this study I will conduct a review of pre-existing literature.

Review of Pre-existing Literature

In this study, it is important to look at the pre-existing literature so that I can lay a solid foundation for my understanding of social media and its effects before moving on to my investigation and research. There is a wide array of research that has been conducted about social media over the years and the effects it has on the younger generation. There is a limited field of research readily available that focuses on the effects specifically for young people of faith, but rather on how social media affects secular society and the operation of churches within an online world. My goal for this review of pre-existing literature is to look at what draws young people to social media, what it does to them and finally what it does to their faith.

Why social media?

To reach the end goal of understanding the effects social media has on young Christians's faith, we must look at what draws them to the platforms in the first place. Goodyear and Armour highlight that young people are drawn to social media because of the connectivity it provides with their friends and with the world. *Social media can be a powerful platform to support young people to sustain and develop new peer relations.* (2018) and so therefore it has a big attraction towards it. They have conducted interviews with young people who use social media, and Kelly, one of the interviewees, expresses that she can't be off social media for a length of time because of the disconnection it brings from her friends and peers. To the point where she must explain why she isn't active, *having to post on social media to explain why she will be disconnected from her friends* (ibid) This play that social media companies make on young people's fear of missing out creates a forcefully addictive nature to their platforms, causing daily usage from young people. Victoria Betton's work in the book 'Teen Mental Health in a Online World' also reinforces this idea that young people desperately desire to be connected with the society around them, with one of their interviewers going so far as to say that *it's almost come to the point where you can't be a functioning member of society without being present online or on social media.* (Betton, 2018)

This is the gateway into social media, the desperation to be connected with what their friends are doing and to not be out of the loop gets young people to download these apps and they begin to use them but what keeps them on the apps? Jean Twenge highlights the fact that, in particular, young girls are vulnerable to the trap of chasing likes and followers for self-affirmation. She describes girls *constantly in search of likes and positive comments on their pages, with persistent pressure to post sexy and revealing photos.* (Twenge, 2017) Once you are in the social space, you feel the constant urge to keep posting and working on your account following, because the more likes you get and the more followers young people have, the more it tells them they are popular and liked, which gives them confidence and builds up fragile self-esteem. This tears down their self-image as usually the more revealing posts, as Twenge mentions, get more likes so in a girl's eyes, the better you look, the more likes you will get. Griffiths produced an academic article along with Arienzo and Boursier that looks into the addictive nature that social media platforms use to keep young people using their sites for long periods. Griffiths uses Brown's (1993) six criteria to identify behaviour types that could be considered an addiction to social media use.

- Salience: This refers to social media use being the single most important thing in the individual's life both cognitively and behaviorally.
- Mood modification: This refers to social media use being used to consistently and reliably change an individual's mood state.
- Tolerance: This refers to the amount of social media use building up over time so that longer periods spent engaged in social media use are needed to get the desired mood-modifying effects.
- Withdrawal symptoms: This refers to both physiological and psychological effects that occur when reducing or discontinuing the use of social media.
- Conflict: This refers to social media use compromising and damaging interpersonal relationships, negatively impacting occupational and/or educational activities, and creating intrapsychic conflicts (e.g., subjective loss of control).
- Relapse: This refers to the tendency to re-establish addictive social media behaviours after a period of abstinence.

I believe that this accurately describes just how strong the addictive nature of social media is. As you can see, Griffiths outlines that social media can become something that young people feel they must tap into to lift their mood. If they are low, bored, or simply need stimulation for their extroverted mind, they feel as though social media is the answer. And it becomes very difficult to stop this use of social media, as you will get withdrawal symptoms when you reduce your use and your brain's cravings for mood increase and bored spells are not being satisfied or stimulated. And this can begin to change the way they behave and operate. In my context, I have noticed that a lot of our young people are often on the social media app 'Snapchat' quite often. It seems the reason they use it is because they want to connect with their friends and stay in the loop with what's going on in their friendship groups. And even though some of the young people in my context don't show addictive traits, I do agree with the idea that apps use this fear of disconnect to hook young people onto their apps. Once some of them are hooked and addicted to social media platforms, this is where the true effects on their behaviour and health take place.

What are the effects?

There is a constant debate around the subject of the effects social media has on the younger generation. These effects are both negative and beneficial for young people. I will not be able to look at all the effects that are covered by pre-existing literature, so I will be focusing my writing on what is relevant to my context, in particular effects on mental health, behaviour, and relationships.

The argument about the effects of social media on mental health seems to be two-sided, either it is heavily linked or it has no effect on mental health. In some of Twenge's other work, she believes that there is a link between the time you spend using social media and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, etc. She has put forward research for this theory, with two studies done, which combined account for more than 500,000 US adolescents, which found that time spent engaging with new media (including social media) was associated with increased levels of mental health problems and suicide risk (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018)

Other theorists would back up Twenge and her colleagues in this argument by doing a study looking at the effects of taking social media away from young people. It is believed by some theorists that reducing the use of social media by around half an hour or less per day increases well-being, with a decrease in loneliness and depression (Hunt, Marx, Lipson, & Young, 2018) If these theories are true, then this brings an interesting juxtaposition to what I reviewed in the literature previously about the addictive nature of social media and how it targets the fear of missing out and being alone and disconnected. However, it seems that Hunt and their colleagues suggest that reducing social media use has the opposite effect. This is because, theoretically, the time spent using social media and mobile devices may displace other meaningful activities that might be protective for mental health, such as exercise or social interactions such as face-to-face time with family or friends. (Rosen, 2022) I experienced this when I decided to take a break from social media. My mood, energy levels, and face-to-face social interactions increased, although I don't have evidence to fully prove the correlation.

Not all theorists and psychologists agree with this. Orben & Przybylski challenge the idea that 'screen time' has any effect at all; they state that in one study they found that the effect is almost nonexistent, with the effect of screen time on mental health problems being about as impactful as eating potatoes (Orben & Przybylski, 2019) What Orben and Przybylski show us is that it's not all about the physical time that has the effect; rather, the types of damages and impacts that social media causes in that time frame are the main factor. For example, two people may be tested using social media for the same amount of time but might have different effects depending on what the person likes and what they are watching. Different people respond to social media differently and not everyone watches the same stuff on social media. An argument I would make against Orben and Przybylski is that when looking at the book in which they have shown their studies. At the end of the book Przybylski is shown to have links with Facebook and Google, now this doesn't mean the report has been funded by Facebook to write a positive report on social media but the links might lead to explain why these authors have such contrasting views to other authors.

Social media does relate to behaviour patterns within young people. With our younger generations of children and youth being born into a world where social media is an integral part of society, their development is directly linked to social media. Patterns and character traits are ingrained into their way of thinking from a young age. These generations would be classed as 'digital natives'. "Digital natives" is a term for a generation of children "raised in a digital, media-saturated world, who require a media-rich learning environment to hold their attention. (Blink, 2015) Because of the nature of the environment they have grown up in, this can change how they act compared to people who aren't digitally native, which tends to be the generation born before Gen Z. But even before social media was brought into the world, theorists understood what pathological/addictive use of things can do to people, which can relate to the use of social media. Jacobs wrote about this even before the 2000s with his work about the general theory of addiction, in which he highlights that individuals with pathological tendencies typically have more unregulated behaviour and are predisposed to feelings of inadequacy (Jacobs, 1986) And there are many more effects which are covered by much more literature. These effects, even though they are predominantly mentioned in conjunction with the whole of society and not just Christian circles, can directly influence young people with their faith.

How can the effects impact faith?

There is limited literature that talks about the challenge that social media poses to young people's faith as well as its strengths. Often, the review of social media is tied to the whole of society, not just Christians. You can pull from these reviews and relate them to people's faith journeys. Although, Alford, the leader of the limitless festival, covers some ground on this subject specifically looking at the impacts on faith with his book 'Leadership 101' where he speaks of the effects of social media on young people and leaders. He states that social media can be something that takes up most of our time, telling us that, on average, 'two months of our year is spent online' which is time that could be spent with God, through prayer, bible reading, or doing something life-giving (Alford 2021)

You can make the argument that this time spent online can be spent with God through the Bible App and watching worship videos on YouTube, listening to preachers and sermons online and many other ways.

 Alford goes on to write the addiction that comes with this time spent on social media patterns is something we have the 'right' to do but is not always 'beneficial'. He poses these questions, 'Is it benefiting our relationship with God and the people around us? Is it benefiting our mental and emotional well-being? And if it's not, what should we do about it?' (Alford 2021) Alford, although doesn't condemn social media as a bad thing for our faith, says that social media can be a useful tool when we use it right (Alford 2021) in his work, he goes on to give some tips for 'leaders' rather than young people on how to handle social media healthily, but this is out of scope for this literature review. Graystone believes that social media is a positive thing for the church and Christians, he looks back and wonders how the biblical heroes of the faith like Paul would interact with social media. He says it is a privilege to be alive at this time. 'Wouldn't St Paul have loved to live in the twenty-first century, He would have been podcasting his sermons and Skyping his distant congregations. We would be studying Paul's 364th email to the Corinthians' (Graystone, 2019)

I do believe that social media is a tool that can be used for the benefit of young Christians, but I also agree that social media has affected the behavioural traits of digital natives causing them to interact with society differently. Because of the benefits and the addictive nature of taking hold of the digital natives, it would be challenging and unhealthy to remove social media from young people's lives. So instead we should look at how it can be handled effectively and healthily.

In this study I will move on to further primary research, in this next section I will look into the reasoning behind my research methods and the theology that creates the framework of my study.

Methodology

To achieve the goal of my study, I must go from asking my overarching question to approaching a method so I can find the answer to my question, to finally receiving the answer to my question. In this stage of my study, I will write an overview of the methods I will use to achieve the answer to my question. My methodology will be structured as follows: I will first identify and analyse the theory that has been forming and structuring my methods and research approaches. Then I will be presenting my method of primary research, with my reasoning behind using survey and interviewing methods with the pros and cons behind qualitative and quantitative research, and then finally looking at the ethics behind this.

My dissertation aims to answer the question: What impacts does social media have on young people and their faith? This main objective is broken down into sub-objectives:

- What causes young people to use social media?
- What are the effects of social media on young people
- How do these effects impact faith?

My Methods and Research will work to answer these questions.

The theory that has formed the research

Media Dependency Theory, established by DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach in 1989 in their study in which they examined mass communication theories, has influenced my research and shaped the questions and kinds of methods used. This theory was initially developed before social media existed and was more closely associated with other media platforms like news organisations, television, etc. Even though this theory is dated before the period of social media the main principles of the theory are true. They can become more relatable when you modify their base theories into, what I am calling, Social Media Dependency Theory, which is the idea that this dependency also exists in social media platforms.

Media dependency theory states that because people now rely more on media for information, entertainment, and social interaction, media has a greater influence on people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Regardless of the agenda that the media source sets for the viewer, the audience will continue to visit these outlets because they depend on them for their entertainment. There is a strong social media connection here, in my opinion. As previously discussed, there is some prior research that suggests young people develop a dependency on social media because they depend heavily on it to stay in touch with friends and family and to stay informed about current events and global trends. This implies that even when social media is having long-term negative effects on cognitive function, it is difficult for young people to stop using it.

Quantitative and Qualitative and Mixed Method Research

Data collection is split into two forms, primary research, in which you collect data specifically for your research project and secondary research, which is collected by someone else for another purpose and then made available for re-use. (Kara and Helen, 2013) My secondary research has been conducted in the review of pre-existing literature. So going forward I will be mainly focussing on primary research while pulling from some of the secondary research covered previously.

Primary research is often split into different types of primary research. For my study, I will be working with both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research results are presented as "quantities" or numbers, which are usually but not always presented through statistical analysis. Qualitative research results are presented primarily through words, most commonly by interviewing people or observing settings and analysing the data by reviewing interview transcripts and/or field notes. (Patten, 2017) Surveys can be classified as qualitative research by providing the participants with questions that require longer in-depth answers. However, for my study, I will be structuring my surveys using quantitative research techniques to act as the broad baseline data so I can get a clear understanding of the trends among the group of participants. This quantitative research will be formatted into statistical graphs and tables.

Although, I don't believe quantitative research will fully answer the question I have posed for my study. This is why I'm also conducting qualitative research because I want to get more in-depth responses from my participants. The viewpoints, experiences, and opinions of young people regarding their faith and how they interact with it through technology and social media can be thoroughly explored through qualitative research. By applying both qualitative and quantitative methodologies I am ensuring that the failings of one are compensated for by the other. (Pickard 2017) Because of this, I think, as Pickard points out, you need both qualitative and quantitative methods to fully answer the question I'm posing. Taking this into account, my research ultimately falls under the category of mixed-method research.

Explanation of Research Methods

Firstly, I'll be sending out a survey to get a wider range of opinions and responses. The target audience for this survey will be the youth of my church, which should provide around 30+ responses, which will give me a broader field of research. Although, on its own, this data will be vague and quite surface level. To fully analyse the conversations, I will also be conducting one-on-one interviews with three different young people. These interviews will be voice-recorded and transcribed. Since a survey does not permit much follow-up, I am conducting interviews to elicit more thorough responses and opinions from my target audience. In these interviews, I will have the space and time to probe sub-questions along with the main questions of the interview to get more of an answer from the young person I will be interviewing. Interviews can be used as a means for collecting straightforward factual data. The time and expense of conducting interviews are better rewarded when the researcher is trying to tackle a complex issue (Denscombe 2021)

In my opinion, conducting a survey is crucial when addressing a problem that affects a sizable portion of the population (in my study, this is young people). If you want to get information about a large group of individual people or things, for example, students or cars, it is normally impossible to get all of them to answer your questions or to examine all the things – it would take much too long and be far too expensive (Walliman 2017) And alternatively, if I just rely on a few individual interviews for my research, I might not get a complete picture of how the problem affects all young people; instead, I might only see how it affects these specific people, and their experiences might be very different from what the majority of the target audience believes. But despite my desire to reach a larger audience, I have a specific target in mind. I want to learn 'how social media impacts young people and their faith', so I will be conducting my research among young Christians to do this. This means my survey method will be a non-probability sample, I will not cover young people as a whole but rather specifically 11-18 Christians.

Non-probability sampling is when the researcher is targeting a particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population; it simply represents itself. This is frequently the case in small-scale research, for example, with one or two schools, and two or three groups of students. (Cohen, 2011) Even though social media affects non-Christians just as much as it does Christians, my main objective ultimately is to determine how social media affects faith, a more comprehensive survey is not in my scope. Borg and Gall state, "Sample size might also be constrained by cost – in terms of time, money, stress, administrative support, the number of researchers, and resources." (Borg and Gall, 1996) To spread my smaller-scale research to the widest audience I have in my context, I will be using Google Forms, and all the surveys will be completed digitally. This digital survey will be sent through online communication streams such as messaging and emails with a link.

To obtain the best qualitative data, I am conducting one-on-one interviews with the young people in our youth group in my church context in addition to surveys. These interviews should last between 5-10 minutes, and I'll voice record them so I can keep track of every detail of the conversation and transcribe exactly what was said. I will conduct two or three of these interviews to gather a variety of viewpoints, and I will speak with three different people from three different backgrounds to better understand how different life experiences can influence people's perspectives. This is so I can gain perspectives from different ethnicities, backgrounds and upbringings. In light of this, my sampling is also classed as purposive representative sampling. In this technique, the researchers purposely choose subjects who, in their opinion, are relevant to the project. (Sarantakos, 2013)

The research method's ethical foundation

To conduct the research safely and responsibly, several ethical considerations have been taken into account. Getting the participants' informed consent is a key ethical focus point because my research involves interviewing and surveying them. Getting the participant's consent is essential to safeguarding my research and myself. In addition, before requesting consent, I will make sure the participant is fully informed about the nature, goals, and purpose of the research for their safety and peace of mind. In addition, I have to make sure that participants understand that they are free to discontinue participation in the study at any time and that it is entirely voluntary. Consent must be given voluntarily, without coercion. Researchers are implored to recognise the unequal social status of adults and children, with young people and children being more easily swayed into participating. I do not want my participants to feel that they are obligated to participate but rather that they do so out of free will (Masson, 2004).

In my interviews, consent and understanding are obtained from the participant by having them sign a consent declaration form attesting to their understanding of all the requirements of the interview. This declaration form will be read out in full to the participant before consent is given. For my survey, a disclaimer that includes a brief explanation of the questionnaire will be included with a checkbox for participants to indicate their understanding and consent to the collection of their data. Examples of my interview declaration form and survey questions and disclaimers can be found in Appendix 1 and 2

Another ethical consideration is obtaining parental consent in my research, as I am working with participants between the ages of 14-18. According to associations such as the National Children's Bureau and SRA's publication of research ethics guidance (February 2021) parental consent is not needed for ages 16 and above. Pushing for parental consent over 16-year-old participants can result in the inappropriate inclusion of third parties in the research and a lack of acknowledgement of young people's competency to understand and thus consent to my research (Richards, 2015) There is also no legal requirement to obtain consent from a parent or responsible adult for a child under 16 to take part in research but, in general, this is good practice in social research. (SRA 2021)

However, because I am abiding by the Newman University policies for my study and because my ethics form was approved based on following these policies, I will be collecting parental consent for all of my participants under the age of 18 even if the law states otherwise.

Making sure my participants' identities and confidentiality are protected is another crucial factor to my ethical foundation. To protect the privacy of the participants, I will take steps to ensure that the information gathered through the interviews and surveys is kept private and anonymous. For instance, I will store the data on a secure platform, like servers such as Google Drive, and forego gathering identifying data like names or email addresses to maintain anonymity. And for my last ethical consideration, I'll take precautions to prevent hurting or upsetting the participants.

Some of the interview and survey questions may be touchy or upsetting for some participants. Therefore, I will make sure that the questions are worded neutrally and without judgment, and there won't be any that require participants to discuss sensitive subjects. This is why I am doing this research with youth who know and trust me, this will allow them to be more comfortable partaking in a one-on-one interview. When picking these youth, I will ensure that there will be no bias in their answers based on the questions I give. When you're using a research approach that requires you to work closely with participants to unearth or generate data, key ethical issues include building trust, developing rapport, and setting expectations, which is my reasoning behind using young people we have preexisting relations with (Leavy, 2022) And because I am working with young people within the church, the work in this area will all be done under the policies and safeguarding regulations of OneChurch (One Church 2022)

Results and Discussion

This section of my study covers the findings from the primary research I conducted in order to respond to my research question, "What Impacts does Social Media have on Young People and their Faith?" I will divide the results in this section of the dissertation into two categories, which will be followed by a discussion of the results:

- My quantitative results, which will be derived from my survey using graphs and result tables.

- My qualitative results, which will be transcribed interviews arranged according to the major questions (I will refer back to the questions as references to look back to when discussing the results of the interviews.)

Quantitative Results

As previously stated, my quantitative results have been gathered from the surveys that I sent out to my target audience, they were completed by 30, 16-18 year olds. When I constructed the survey, the independent variables that I wanted to observe is the conditions of the participants social media usage. For example, questions such as

- On average, how many hours in total do you spend daily on social media platforms (e.g. Snapchat, Instagram, Tik Tok, Youtube ect)
- How do you primarily use social media?
- Do you follow any Christian accounts/pages on social media?
- How often do you come across Christian content while scrolling through social media?

The way that this independent variable (the condition of the participant's social media usage) changes based on the individual will influence the outcome of the dependent variable. The dependent variable is the impact this usage has on the individual's well being and faith, which is shown in the questions such as:

- Do you feel pressured to maintain a certain image or lifestyle on social media?
- How often do you find yourself distracted from schoolwork or other responsibilities due to social media?
- Have you ever felt addicted to or unable to stop using social media, even when you wanted to?
- How do you think social media influences the overall well-being and mental health of young people?

Now I will present different figures which highlight specific results from the survey

Figure 1a

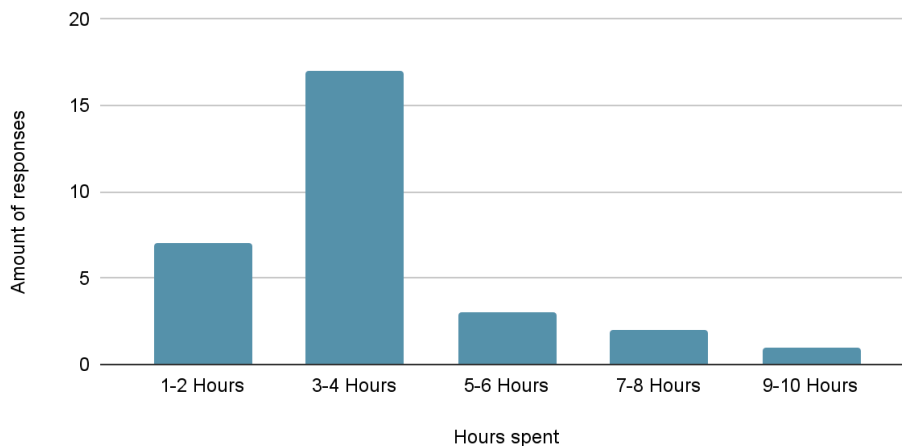On average how many hours in total do you spend daily on social media platforms?

Figure 1b

How do you primarily use social media?

Percentages represent the amount of responses

- To explore hobbies and interests
- To connect with friends and family
- To stay updated with news and current events
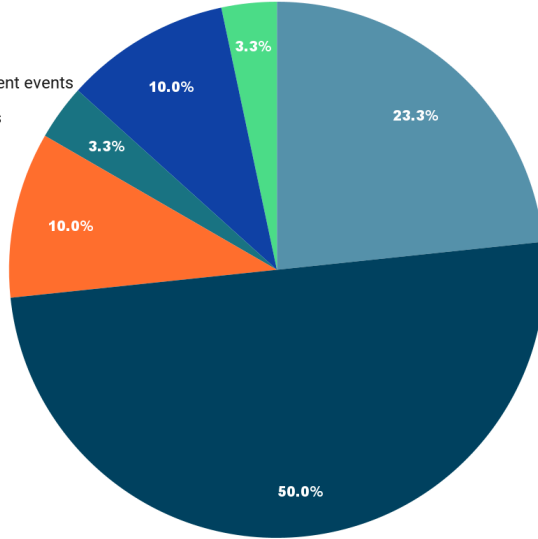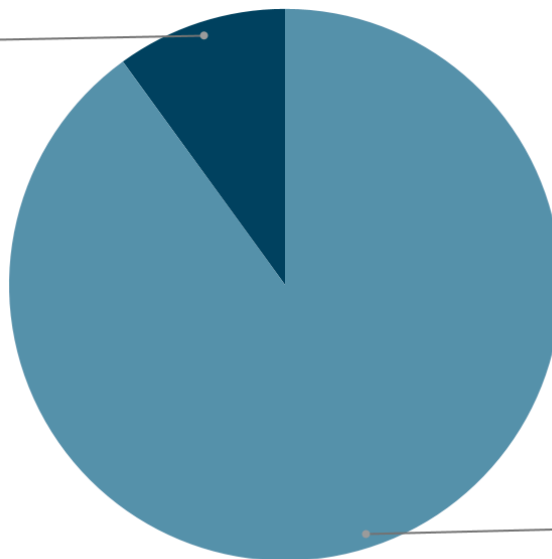- To follow celebrities and influencers
- Entertainment
- Other

23.3%

50.0%

10.0%

3.3%

10.0%

3.3%

Figure 1c

Do you follow any Christian accounts/pages on social media?

Percentages based on amount of responses

No
10.0%

Yes
90.0%

Figure 1d

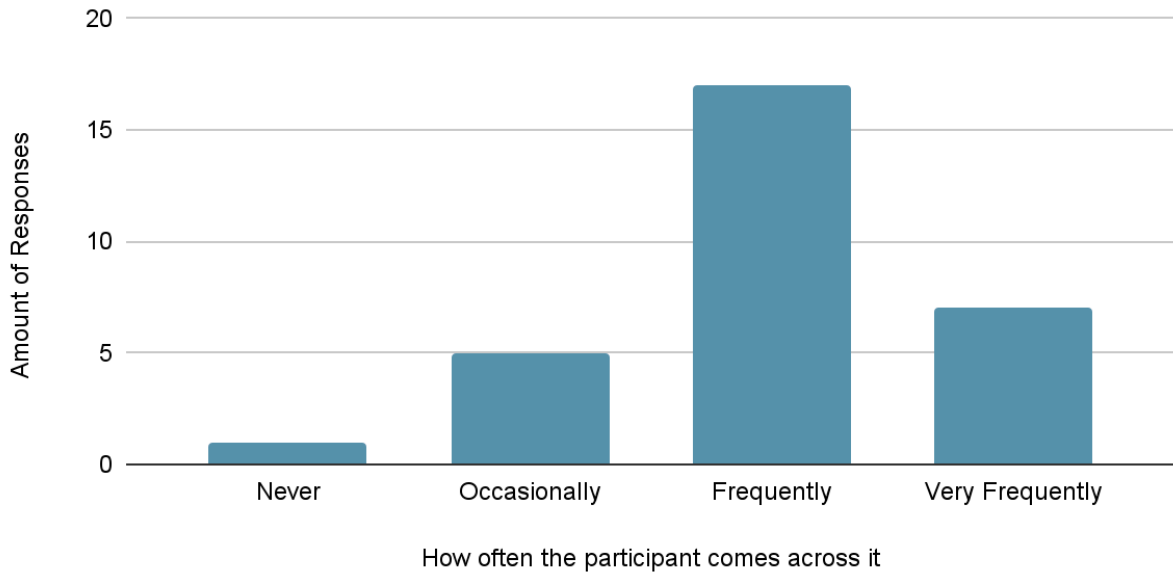## How often do you come across Christian content while scrolling through social media?

Figure 1e

Do you feel pressured to maintain a certain image or lifestyle on social media?

Percentages based on amount of responses
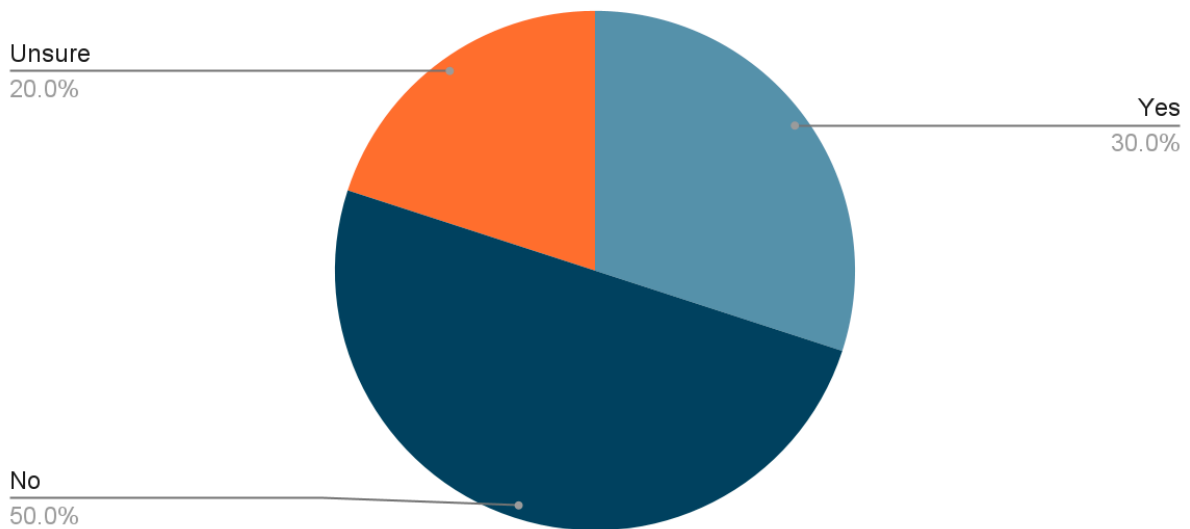

Unsure
20.0%

Yes
30.0%

No
50.0%

Figure 1f

How often do you find yourself distracted from schoolwork or other responsibilities due to social media?
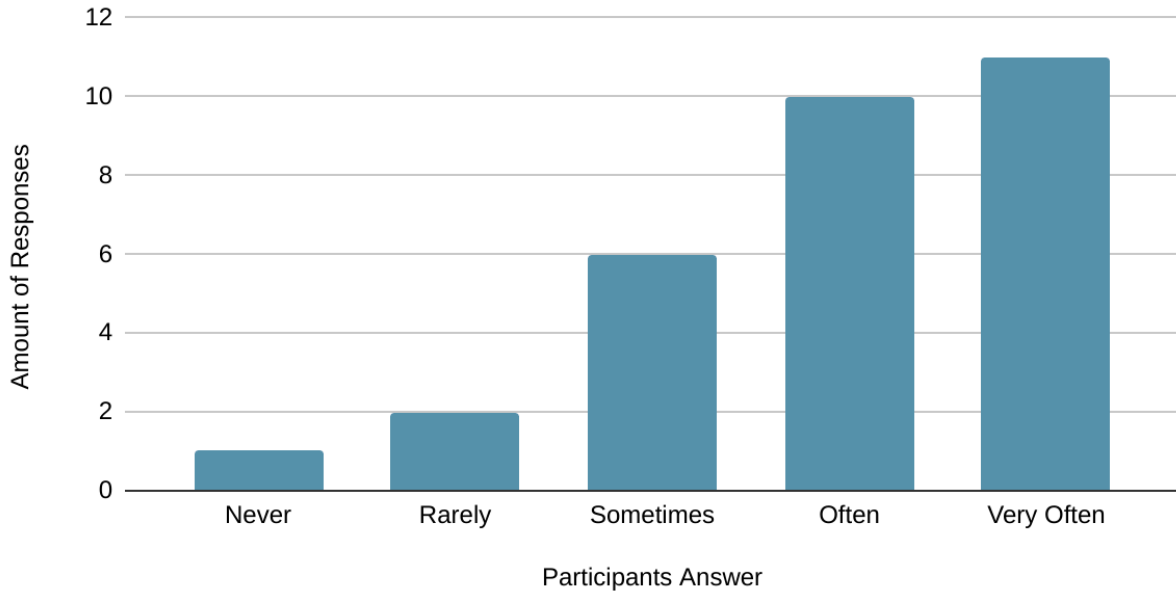

Figure 1g

Have you ever felt addicted to or unable to stop using social media, even when you wanted to?

Percentages based on amount of responses
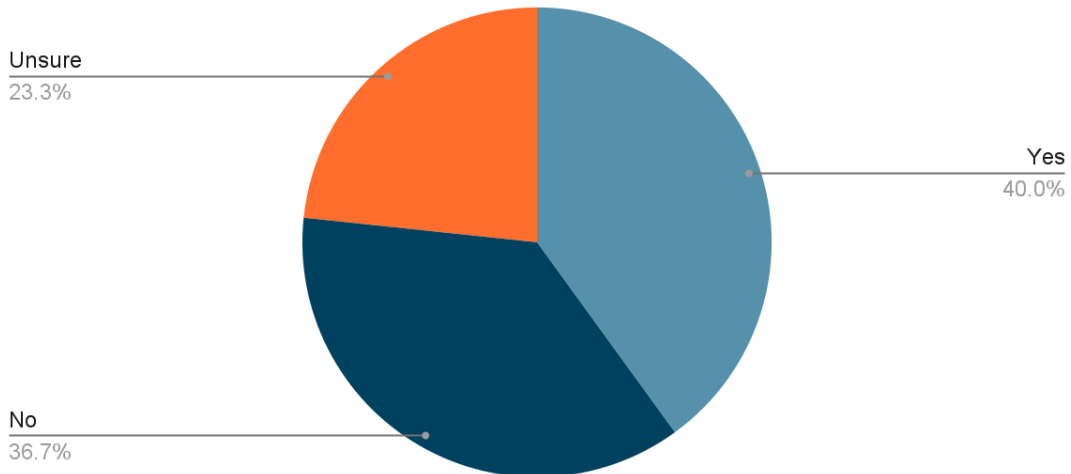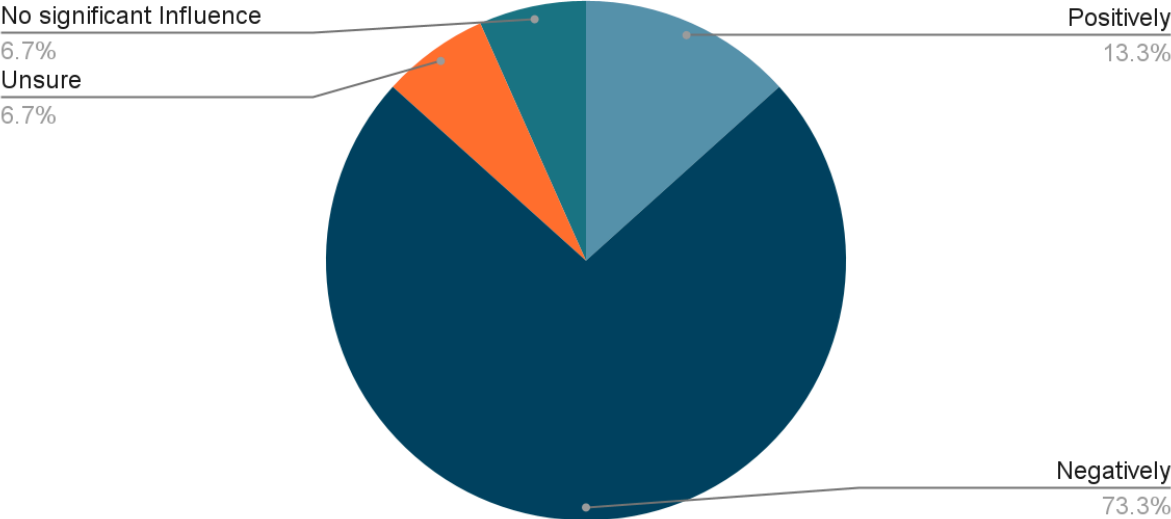

Unsure
23.3%

Yes
40.0%

No
36.7%

Figure 1h

How do you think social media influences the overall well-being and mental health of young people?

Percentages based on amount of responses

No significant Influence
6.7%

Unsure
6.7%

Positively
13.3%

Negatively
73.3%

Qualitative Results

My qualitative results will be drawn from the interviews that I conducted with three young people from my church youth group. These interviews are around 5-10 minutes long, and they were recorded in the coffee shop of our church building. To display these interviews to you, I will present the transcription of each interview in full as Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c. Then, to categorise the different sections of the transcription, I will create a referencing guide to make it easy to look back on certain aspects of each interview. It will be a 3-part reference which will look like this for example 1bA

- The number at the start indicates which interview it is: **1 means the first Interview**
- The lowercase letter in the second part of the reference shows which interview questions we are looking at: **b means the second question that is asked**
- The uppercase letter at the end of the reference shows whether we are focusing on the questions or the answer: **A means the answer**

So if I use reference 1bA, it means we are looking at the answer to the second question of the first interview.

These results can be found in Appendices 1, 2 and 3

Quantitative Result Analysis and Discussion

To address my main research questions, I will delve deeply into the survey results in this section, highlighting similarities and differences between relevant data sets. Firstly, looking at Figure 1a, we can immediately see that young people, on average, spend around 3-4 hours a day on social media. According to the NHS (2021), children need around 9-13 hours of sleep a day. An average UK school day lasts for just over 6 hours, as highlighted by the GOV.UK article released in 2021, which reviewed time in schools (being published in 2021, this might be outdated but the time in school would not have deviated away from the 6-hour mark.) After the average sleeping and school time for a young person have been added up, there are around 8 hours of the day left. This means that on average, 50% of young people's spare time is spent on social media. Robbins quotes 'It's not what we do once in a while that shapes our lives, but what we do consistently' (Robbins, 2013) If social media accounts for half of youths' free time daily, it is my belief that social media shapes youths' lives and influences their cognitive development, whether positively or negatively. However, what effects do these hours spend on social media have on the information gathered from the surveys?

Right away, we can contrast how many hours you work with how focused you are on other aspects of your life, like your responsibilities or education. Using the data from Figures 1a and 1f, we can create a chart that compares the amount of time spent on social media to the frequency of being distracted from other aspects of the participant's life.

Figure 3a

Hours spent on social media compared to frequency of distraction
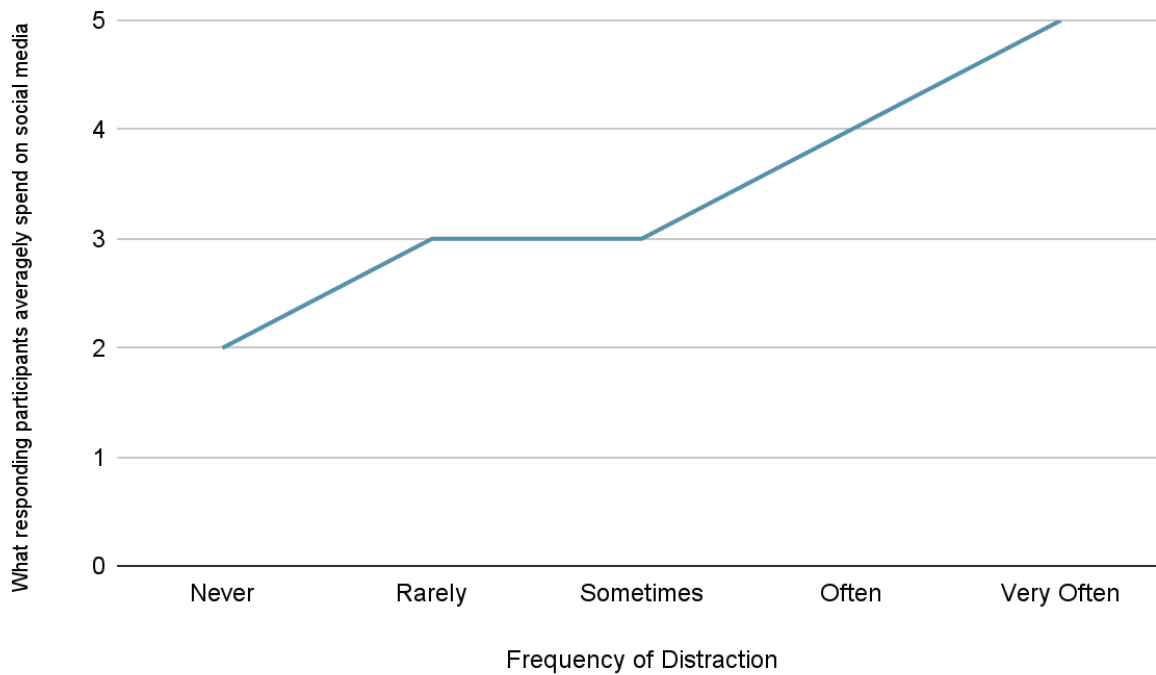
There is evidence to suggest that students who spend more time on social media on average are less focused on their academic work and other obligations. Lacking focus in education could bring down grades for the individual, hampering possible career opportunities. And if distraction is a frequent thing for your people who spend time on social media, then this could lead to distraction in their bible reading, prayers, and devotion to God. Bible reading and prayer are simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life. (Keller, 2014) so being distracted from it could impact our faith.

A big piece of data we can see is that in Figure 1h around 73% of young people believe social media has a negative impact on their wellbeing and mental health. This is a sizeable statistic that cannot be ignored in my study. We can also look at Figure 1g and compare the set of data with what we see in Figure 1h.

When comparing the two sets of data using each participant's responses to both of these questions, we see that all participants, bar one who feels addicted to social media, also say it negatively impacts their well-being and mental health. This locks young people in a relentless cycle of being addicted to social media an endless cycle of scrolling and tapping (Newport 2021) while it degrades their well-being and mental health over time.

Figure 1b shows us the reasons that young people use social media. Of the young people who participated in the survey, around 50% said that they use social media because they like to connect with friends and family. This troupe of needing to be connected with friends to avoid the feeling of disconnect is seen in Betton's work, which we looked at in the literature review earlier in this study. The fear of missing out (FOMO) is a powerful motivator. Social media platforms exploit this psychological trigger, making them addictive. Users constantly check their feeds because they don't want to miss out on what others are doing, fearing disconnection from their social circle. (Eyal 2014) This figure backs up this concept, as most of the participants are on social media to stay in touch with the people around them.

Qualitative Result Analysis and Discussion

We can see this idea that social media locks young people into constant usage because of the need to be connected with the people around us when we look at the interviews conducted with 3 young people. In all three interviews, we can see that young people give similar answers to the same question. Using the referencing system mentioned above from my qualitative research, we can look at 1fA 2fA and 3fA and see that the young people mention similar themes of being less connected with the people around them, contacting friends less, and being less in touch with the world. This reinforces the fact that social media has a hold on young people's lives by playing on FOMO and disconnecting.

Providing a dependency on social media for their connectivity and also for their entertainment, as we see in 2fA, the participant states, "I'd be pretty bored as well because, yanno, there is not a lot to do." According to this participant, when social media isn't present, boredom creeps in. Even seven years ago, we saw authors state that phones have become young people's primary entertainment devices (Alter 2017) so in 2024, it's even more difficult to be entertained without them. This struggle generates dependence.

Having been informed by Figure 1h that the majority of young people feel social media negatively impacts their well-being, we can look at 1eA 2eA and 3eA and see if there is further truth to this idea. Young people mentioned in these sections that they felt "deflated" (1eA) and "depleted" (3eA) and after using social media heavily for a day, one of the participants felt as though they "haven't really accomplished much" (3eA) with 1eA also supporting this case, with the participant stating that "I haven't done anything productive for the whole day." From these answers, we can assume that the increased usage of social media can cause people to feel low and deflated, leading to a lack of motivation and accomplishment. Researchers have long found that intrinsic motivation tends to prompt more sustaining energy (Loehr and Schwartz, 2005) so without it we lack energy, keeping us inside our homes, on our sofas or beds, and going back to the only thing that can provide the entertainment we need, social media. Thus creates this vicious cycle of addiction, dependency, and over-usage which then leads to distraction, deflation, lack of accomplishment, and lack of motivation, which causes low energy and a need to be entertained. If this cycle becomes a weekly occurrence, this will undoubtedly impact the rest of our lives and, consequently, our faith.

We can see how the participants view the impact on their faith with the final two questions of the interview. 1gQ, 2gQ, and 3gQ all of which ask about what the positive impacts of faith are. Most of the participants discuss the ease of sharing faith among their peers or even on the wider web. One participant stated, "It's a lot easier to spread the gospel through social media. It can be a simple message or video." (1gA) The technology readily available to the digital native generation means that they can output the gospel more efficiently. This suggests to the church that there is a potential need to take the gospel to a new platform. As the internet increasingly became a conduit for the gospel and biblical teaching, churches of all sizes began to discover a new mission field in the digital world. (Rainer, 2020) However knowing whether a digital gospel message would have a better response than a physical one is not clearly shown in my results, although this would be an interesting area for further study. In 3gA, the participant explains that various posts, reels, and shorts found on different social media platforms can inspire and motivate you in your faith. This is an interesting juxtaposition to what we find when looking at the responses to 1eQ, 2eQ, and 3eQ.

The same participant who said they felt like they "haven't accomplished much" and felt "depleted" after using social media heavily (3eA) stated in 3gA they can also feel motivated in faith by what other Christians on social media post. This aligns with what King Solomon teaches us in Proverbs 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Our faith can become stronger from witnessing another believer's faith and we are shown their faith through Christian social media accounts. Some of the participants would also state that a final positive would be the accessibility of the Bible app, which provides ease in opening up God's word. I would argue that this is not necessarily a complete positive, but it does allow young Christians to access the Bible quickly and for free, which can be good for spontaneous moments or short periods. But if this becomes a habit of only using your phone to access the Bible, then for times when young people want to sit for longer periods to read the Bible, they will be more open to the distractions that phones bring.

I would also argue that this data doesn't directly contribute to my main study question; the Bible app isn't accessed through social media but rather just through your phone. There is a need for further study to be done in this area to understand if the Bible app and other Christian apps can benefit our faith.

We can also see the negative impacts on our faith in 1hA, 2hA, and 3hA. We are shown that not only can the things people post have positive impacts on our faith, but they can also bring about disbelief, bad lessons, and negative changes in people's faith. According to the responses given, the way Christianity is portrayed and talked about can have "detrimental" impacts on faith. For example, if social media is the main influence on your life, then the information it gives you about the Christian faith is going to sink into your mind. And if the information isn't entirely true, then this can shift what you believe. Especially if a Christian is giving out false teachings about faith. In the first interview, the participant makes an interesting case about comparison being harmful to faith. In 1hQ, the participant states, "The negative is that social media makes you think you're not good enough because you're always comparing yourself to other people." I think the concept of comparison culture within social media plays a crucial part in how it affects faith. We often see how other people live, and social media causes us to compare ourselves to others and live by other people's standards, which are not always biblical, healthy, or genuine. Many social media users have the intent to portray their "best self," using photo-enhancing filters, embellishing stories to make themselves sound exciting, or focusing on only the good parts of life (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) which portrays a false view of life. In the pursuit of this, young people may forget the values of a 'Christian life,' which include the ups and the downs, the struggles, the challenges, honesty, and inward reflection rather than outward comparison.

Considering all of these discussion points I will now move on to my conclusions.

Conclusion

This study has been conducted to answer the question, "What impact does social media have on your people and their faith?" This main question has been broken down into three subquestions: What causes young people to use social media? What are the effects of social media on young people? And finally, how do these effects impact faith? I have worked to answer these 3 subquestions by conducting reviews of pre-existing literature on the subject and collecting quantitative data from surveys conducted on 30, and 16 to 18-year-olds. And also collected qualitative data from 3 surveys that I carried out on 3 participants of varying ages between 14 and 18. After summarising and reviewing all the data collected, both secondary and primary, these are my conclusions.

What causes young people to use social media?

Based on what I have discovered in my literature review and primary research, there are a few key points that have stuck out to me. First and foremost, young people desire social media to stay updated about global events and maintain relationships with their peers, this is shown in my interview responses. They worry about losing contact with their friends and feeling cut off from society if they do not use social media. Young people feel as though they are missing out on things, which makes them feel as though they must constantly check social media. This is backed up with what I discovered in my literature review when Betton stated that it's almost come to the point where you can't be a functioning member of society without being present online or on social media (2018). It is also a source of entertainment for young people, and because of the high usage of social media, for some young people, this has become their only source of entertainment.

Without it, the participants in my studies explain they would get bored as there isn't much else to do. And so, because social media is the only way for some young people to connect with their friends, and be connected to the world and entertained, there is a dependency on social media that is generated, making it difficult for young people to reduce their usage. And it is even more difficult to remove social media completely out of young people's lives because of this dependency. But is there a need to remove it? That would depend on how it affects young people.

What are the effects of social media on young people?

What I have concluded is that there are both positive and negative effects on social media but my research would tell me that social media overall harms young people. A lot of the positives of social media can be found in the previous paragraph, it connects people and provides a good insight into what is happening in the world, such as the latest trends and important events. It is also a way to be entertained with funny videos, images, and insightful guides for people's hobbies. The young people that I interviewed showed me that there is also accessibility to Christian content found through social media. If used in healthy dosages, these can all benefit a young person's well-being. But the first issue is that young people face an over-usage problem, with my research showing me that on average, young people spend half of their free time on social media, around 3-4 hours. This statistic means young people spend half their free time indoors, either sitting or lying down, staring at a screen. This has obvious effects on health; for example, lacking exercise in a daily routine will lead to weight and fatigue problems. And prolonged use of screens can lead to blurred vision, eye fatigue, dry eyes and headaches (Moorfields Eye Hospital 2023) Not only does social media affect physical health but also young people's mental health. Extended periods on social media leave young people feeling deflated and unmotivated, which was noted in my interview responses. This shares similar thoughts with Schwartz's views, found in my literature review. A lack of motivation can lead to a reduction in energy levels, leaving an individual in a depressive state (2005). Most young people agree that social media negatively affects their mental health. And as well as a change to health and mental health, it can finally affect an individual's behaviour. The study has proven that the more hours you spend on social

media, the more frequently you feel distracted from other responsibilities. This level of distraction can be a damaging behavioural trait that could lead to inconsistent work productivity and a lack of focus in spaces such as lectures or religious sermons. Results showed that the majority of young people feel addicted to their social media and are unable to stop using it. This lack of willpower and self-control can begin to reduce an individual's discipline. Again, a lack of discipline and self-control is a damaging character trait to have in a job, in education, and also in faith.

How do these effects impact faith?

One of the fruits of the spirit, which can be found in Galatians 5:22-23, is self-control. Having discipline and self-control is one of the core aspects of faith. If a young person lacks discipline and self-control, they will not be able to persist with their prayers, their quiet times with God, and their extensive time in God's word. They will have an urge to pick up their phones and take time away from their devotion to the Lord. This can be coupled with the knowledge that young people feel social media causes them to be distracted easily. If they can be easily distracted, this will also pull them away from time with God, which requires patience and persistence. It is also evident that young people are readily swayed by what they encounter on social media. Numerous posts and news articles present a negative picture of Christianity and frequently spread misleading information about it. Should a young person decide to take these posts at face value, it could be harmful to their faith. Also, the comparison culture that resonates on social media can cause young people to aspire to a false lifestyle. Social media feeds often only show the best bits of someone's life. Which creates a false image of what a 'good life' looks like. Young Christians need to understand that a life of faith has high and low moments, struggles, trials, and challenges. However, an interesting discovery from this study is that young people view social media as something that mostly benefits faith. They believe they can use the platforms to spread the gospel message to friends more easily. Participants in the research also believe that Christian influencers who spread their faith positively on Christian pages can motivate and inspire their faith. Graystone agreed with this in the review of pre-existing literature sections, he believes Paul's ministry would have been more effective with the use of social media (2019)

I also think about my context and understand that social media plays a vital role in the operation of our youth ministry. Information gets sent to social media group chats and pages. Young people find out about our church through our Instagram pages and a lot of our pastoral check-ups are initiated through texting on social media platforms.

Final conclusions and thinking for future study

This study has shown me that social media isn't something that can be simply taken away from our society of young people. It is a core part of a young person's daily rhythm. Social media causes harmful and lasting changes to young people's health, mental health, and behaviour. These lasting effects can make it more challenging for young people to engage with faith. And if young people succumb to the influence of what these social media feeds tell them about Christianity, they could lose their faith entirely. But on the other hand, it can also be a tool that connects young people, keeps them updated with what's happening in our world, and provides entertainment as well. And it can greatly benefit young people's faith if used correctly. Providing ease to spread the gospel, learn great lessons on how to live a Godly life and be inspired by the way other Christian influencers live theirs.

It seems that if young people conduct the average usage of social media, it will negatively impact them and their faith. But if we can learn how to healthily use social media, it can be a tool that benefits them and has a positive impact on their faith. The further study that can be done from this dissertation would be 'How do we use social media healthily and positively' and I also think it would be interesting to do further research on Social Media Dependency Theory and see if there is any way to combat the way young people depend on social media.

I hope this study I have conducted will benefit those working in the youth work space, schools, wellbeing and health institutes and also for parents of young people. I implore you to go and do further study on this subject to create a greater understanding of social media and its effects/impacts. Thank you for reading.

Appendix 1

Figure 2a

<u>Interview 1</u>

The interview begins with Josh Gale introducing the study and reading the participant information sheet out to the participant.

Questions begin

<u>Question: a</u>

Q: Please state your age and gender.

A: I'm fifteen and I'm a male.

<u>Question: b</u>

Q: What social media do you use on your phone?

A: Uh, mostly Snapchat, Youtube. I think I may have like two or three others but those are the main two.

<u>Question: c</u>

Q: On average, how many hours a day would you say you spend on social media?

A: For a regular day, I'd say around three hours

<u>Question: d</u>

Q: Why do you personally use social media?

A: Just to talk to people, connecting with friends and family and maybe just to watch videos on YouTube.

Question: e

Q: After a day of using social media more heavily than usual, how do you feel?

A: Really a bit deflated, because it shows that I haven't anything productive for the whole day, and yeah just very depressed with myself.

Question: f

Q: If social media disappeared suddenly out your life, what would this change for you?

A: Negatively, I would lose a close connection with a lot of people because thats how I talk to a lot of them. But positively, it would be that I would find more time to do things. I wouldn't easily get distracted and yeah, I would just feel more at peace.

Question: g

Q: How does social media positively impact your faith?

A: Positively would be it's a lot easier to spread the gospel through social media. It can be a simple message or video. What ever it can literally say something simple. I definitely think its a lot easier for me to access videos of preachers. To access the Bible App because I use that. Christian pages on Tik Tok and all the comments on these pages aswell.

Question: h

Q: How does it negatively impact your faith?

A: The negative is that social media makes you think you're not good enough because your always comparing yourself to other people. Inappropriate stuff that you can see online at the click of a button. The negative lessons that it can teach you. And all the things that parents don't want their kids to be doing on social media, for all those reasons.

Appendix 2

Figure 2b

<u>Interview 2</u>

The interview begins with Josh Gale introducing the study and reading the participant information sheet out to the participant.

Questions begin

<u>Question: a</u>

Q: Please state your age and gender.

A: I'm seventeen years old and I'm a female

<u>Question: b</u>

Q: What social media do you use on your phone?

A: Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, Youtube, Whatsapp, yeah pretty much all of them

<u>Question: c</u>

Q: On average, how many hours a day would you say you spend on social media?

A: I would say probably 3-4 hours, maybe more like 4 hours.

<u>Question: d</u>

Q: Why do you personally use social media?

A: To get in contact with my friends, to see whats going on with the world and inspiration for my college work.

Question: e

Q: After a day of using social media more heavily than usual, how do you feel?

A: I think I would probably feel entertained but also overwhelmed, It would pass time but also, I would probably feel like I wasted time.

Question: f

Q: If social media disappeared suddenly out your life, what would this change for you?

A: The main changes are that I would not contact my friends as much because my main sort of communication is social media. I'd be pretty bored aswell because yanno there is not a lot to do.

Question: g

Q: How does social media positively impact your faith?

A: I can use it to look at stuff like the bible, I can see other people in their faith using social media, like how they share it and talk about it and I can be inspired by them on what to do and what not to do.

Question: h

Q: How does it negatively impact your faith?

A: Not really sure how it would negatively impact it, but a lot of people do spread negative things about faith on the internet, which could sort of change someone's life, not mine but I can see how it can for others.

Appendix 3

Figure 2c

<u>Interview 3</u>

The interview begins with Josh Gale introducing the study and reading the participant information sheet out to the participant.

Questions begin

<u>Question: a</u>

Q: Please state your age and gender.

A: Yeah, I'm fifteen and im a male.

<u>Question: b</u>

Q: What social media do you use on your phone?

A: Tik Tok, Instagram, Whatsapp, Discord and Threads.

<u>Question: c</u>

Q: On average, how many hours a day would you say you spend on social media?

A: Maybe around 5 hours.

<u>Question: d</u>

Q: Why do you personally use social media?

A: A multitude of reasons, to try and meet up with friends, find out whats happening with them. So for example, on Instagram, you can see their latest posts. Another reason is if you are just bored, thats often it, as there are funny things on there (social media)

Question: e

Q: After a day of using social media more heavily than usual, how do you feel?

A: I feel a little depleted afterwards, looking back on the day and thinking 'ah, haven't really accomplished much'
Question: f

Q: If social media disappeared suddenly out your life, what would this change for you?

A: I would definitely get more done in a day, but then I would be less caught up on whats happening in the world, and I would talk to friends less often.

Question: g

Q: How does social media positively impact your faith?

A: So often on Instagram or Youtube, there is something like reels or shorts and there is good, inspiring God stuff on there, which can be really beneficial. If you wake up in the morning not feeling very motivated and you see something, it can give you motivation. And you can go on the Bible too.

Question: h

Q: How does it negatively impact your faith?

A: There are some things that seem to be really harsh about faith on there. And these can be false things which can be detrimental. I feel a lot of people believe things that people are saying that are not necessarily true. These bold statements can give a negative view upon Christianity.

Appendix 4

CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

What effect might social media have on young people's faith?

Student Number: 2104604

Module: CYU601

This is to certify that this project has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Birmingham Newman University

Birmingham Newman University

L. A. Woodfield

Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

Date: November 23, 2023

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