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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

"It's not all negative like": Exploring Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of their Social Media Use.

Lauren Flynn

CARL Research Project
in collaboration with
The Shona Project

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Name and year of course:	Masters of Social Work, Year 2
Date completed:	20th April 2020

What is Community-Academic Research Links?
Community Academic Research Links (CARL) is a community engagement initiative provided by University College Cork to support the research needs of community and voluntary groups/ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). These groups can be grass roots groups, single issue temporary groups, but also structured community organisations. Research for the CSO is carried out free of financial cost by student researchers.

CARL seeks to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

What is a CSO?
We define CSOs as groups who are non-governmental, non-profit, not representing commercial interests, and/or pursuing a common purpose in the public interest. These groups include: trade unions, NGOs, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organisations, organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life, churches and religious committees, and so on.

Why is this report on the UCC website?
The research agreement between the CSO, student and CARL/University states that the results of the study must be made public through the publication of the final research report on the CARL (UCC) website. CARL is committed to open access, and the free and public dissemination of research results.

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Declaration of Originality

This is to declare that this dissertation titled ***"It's not all negative like"*: Exploring Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of their Social Media Use**, submitted to the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master in Social Work is my own work. Any work that is not my own has been acknowledged and referenced appropriately.

I have reviewed the TurnItIn report prior to submission and made appropriate edits in line with the UCC Plagiarism Policy.

Name: Lauren Flynn

Date: 20th April, 2020.

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Abstract

This dissertation was completed as part of the UCC CARL initiative in conjunction with The Shona Project. This research explores the social media habits of 14-17 year old girls in Ireland, as well as their perception of how social media affects their lives. The existing research in the area is largely concerned with the negative implications of social media use on mental health, body image and social comparison, and cyberbullying; this is addressed in the literature review.

The epistemological positioning applied to this research is social constructivism; this was underpinned by interpretivism as the theoretical perspective. Community-based participatory research is a core component of this dissertation. Primary research was carried out and data was collected from 98 participants via questionnaire. Quantitative data was analysed using the IBM statistical analysis software *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). Descriptive statistics relating to social media habits were extracted and outlined in the research findings. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. The themes highlighted in the findings include: using social media to keep in contact with friends and family, adult misperceptions of social media, responsible social media use, social media as a positive influence, and concerns regarding social media.

The majority of participants reported positive experiences of social media, including using it as a tool for communication and source of inspiration, motivation and education. Participants reported feeling that adults have an unduly negative view of adolescent social media use as well as a lack of understanding of the logistics of social media. A number of concerns relating to social media were also reported, including cyberbullying and anonymity online, fake content, addictive potential, digital footprint, and social pressure of social media. A number of recommendations informed by the findings are also outlined.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to outline the background and rationale for this research. My involvement with the Community Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative will be discussed and I will provide a background of the partner organisation which I collaborated with for this research. The research aims, objectives, and research questions which informed this dissertation will be defined. A chapter overview for the remainder of the dissertation will be outlined.

1.2 Research Title

"It's not all negative like": Exploring Adolescent Girls' Perceptions of their Social Media Use.

1.3 Background to the Research and Rationale

The Shona Project is an organisation which aims to *"educate, empower and inspire today's Irish girls to become tomorrow's resilient, capable and confident young women"* (The Shona Project, 2019, p.3). The Shona Project have a three pronged approach to supporting adolescent girls with the challenges they face; this is achieved by provision of school workshops, an online community through their website and social media platforms, and events and projects. Some of the topics The Shona Project address include anxiety and depression, body image, social media, sexuality and gender identity, bullying, family problems, school and exam stress. The Shona Project has been conducting their workshops in secondary schools with young people from 1st to 6th year since 2016. Their website and social media platform promotes positive role models and features content written by young people who engage with The Shona Project. The Shona Project has a unique and influential positioning on social media; they interact with adolescent girls in their own language and through the mediums which they are influenced. The Shona Project aims to become *"part of the social media feeds of young people, and therefore part of their lives, rather than being accessed only in a crisis situation"* (The Shona Project, 2019, p.13).

This research was conducted in collaboration with The Shona Project through the University College Cork (UCC) CARL initiative. Upon learning about the option to complete a CARL project, I was immediately interested and felt that it would be a worthwhile opportunity to produce a piece of research that would support a community organisation in their work. The Shona Project expressed

interest in partnering with a student for the purpose of conducting research; one of their areas of interest was the impact of social media on adolescent girls. I was familiar with The Shona Project prior to engaging with the CARL initiative and was interested in their approach. The prospect of conducting research with young people and giving them an opportunity to have their voice heard was very exciting for me from the outset, and was a significant motivating factor in conducting this piece of research.

Upon choosing this CARL project, the founder of The Shona Project and I discussed the focus of the research. It was determined that the social media habits of adolescent girls, as well as the social media content that they are consuming were useful areas to research for the partner organisation. Both the community partner and I were interested in adolescent girls' experience of their social media use and how they perceive it affects them. The topic of social media use amongst adolescent girls is of particular interest at present, with widespread concern over the associated implications reported on in the media and amongst professionals and parents. As social media is evolving constantly, so is the experience of the girls who are using it. By being informed of the challenges and experiences that affect adolescent girls, it allows professionals who work with them to be better equipped to both comprehend their experiences and provide support. As social media has a significant role in the lives of many young people, it is vital that professionals have an understanding of the challenges that may arise.

Findings from the research will also benefit my own professional development as a student social worker as it may address issues that will arise in my future work. Having completed my first Masters of Social Work practice placement in a School Completion Project, the impact of social media on young people was certainly evident and this also spurred my interest to research the topic. Much of my work and volunteer experience has been in the community and non-profit sector, which also sparked my interest in partnering with a community project.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to collect a snapshot of the social media habits of adolescent girls in Ireland, specifically in relation to how social media affects mood and self-esteem. This research is particularly focused on learning about what adolescent girls perceive to be the effect of social media on their lives.

The core objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To complete a literature review exploring the topic of social media use amongst adolescent girls.

2. To examine the social media habits of 14-17 year old girls in Ireland.
3. To explore what adolescent girls perceive to be the effect of social media on their lives.
4. To establish how the perspectives of adolescent girls can inform how adults respond to the effects of their social media use.

1.5 Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is known from existing literature, about the impact of social media use on the lives of adolescent girls?
2. What do adolescent girls perceive to be the impact of social media use on their lives?
3. How might resilience development interventions support social media use amongst adolescent girls?

1.6 Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Chapter one introduces the background and rationale of the research. It defines the research aims and objectives, as well as the research questions which informed the research. The UCC CARL initiative is discussed as well as the background of the partner organisation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter two consists of review of the relevant literature and explores the impact of social media on adolescent girls. Sections of the literature review include; adolescent social media use, mental health, body image and social comparison, and cyberbullying.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter three provides an overview of the research process and addresses the epistemological and theoretical perspectives of the research. The research methodology and methods will be outlined. The ethical considerations and my reflexive positioning as a researcher will be discussed in this chapter. Challenges and limitations of the research will also be addressed.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Chapter four will present the findings of the primary research gathered through questionnaire. The analysed data will be discussed in conjunction with the relevant literature.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter five is the final chapter of the dissertation and will conclude the research by making a number of recommendations based on the findings demonstrated in Chapter Four, included potential areas for future research. This chapter concludes with a reflective piece addressing my experience as a researcher.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a background to the existing international research in the area of adolescent social media use. The focus will be on the impact of social media use on adolescent girls in particular. Academic literature as well as government policy and non-profit agency reports will be discussed where relevant.

2.2 Adolescent Social Media Use

Young people worldwide and in Ireland are growing up online. Digital technology has become a central part of adolescents' lives, and has resulted in them becoming 'digital natives' (Allen et al., 2014, p.18). According to a large scale Irish study with 35,867 participants ranging in age across primary and secondary school, Irish children report first accessing the internet at the age of 6-7 years old (Evarri and Park, 2018). Most young people have no experience of a world without instant access to the internet and social media as it has become prominent in the lives of most generations (Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), 2017).

In a recently published European study of 25,101 children aged between 9-16 years old across 19 countries, the majority of participants reported using their smartphones daily or 'almost all the time' (Smahel et al., 2020). European adolescents reported using the internet to watch videos, listen to music, and communicate with friends and family (Smahel et al., 2020). Findings from a study conducted in the United States with 1,141 participants aged between 13-17 years old suggests that social media use among teenagers has increased dramatically since 2012, with 70% using social media multiples times a day (Common Sense, 2018). In terms of Irish adolescent social media use, the favourite apps amongst secondary school students include Snapchat (69%), Instagram (46%), and Youtube (41%) (Evarri and Park, 2018). Findings from research conducted with 13-17 year olds in the United States reported similar choice of favourite social media app, with 41% choosing Snapchat, and 22% choosing Instagram as their main social media app (Common Sense, 2018).

2.3 Mental Health

The impact of social media use on adolescent mental health is a notable concern for young people, parents, schools, governments, and professionals working with young people. Adolescence is a period

of significant importance with regard to emotional and psychosocial development and as a result there is a need for a greater understanding surrounding the impact social media use has on young people (RSPH, 2017). Adolescence is also a period of increased risk of experiencing low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Woods and Scott, 2016).

Findings from research carried out in Scotland with a group of 476 secondary school students aged 11-15 years old suggested a correlation between lower levels of self-esteem and high social media use, as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression (Woods and Scott, 2016). Similarly, an Estonian 2 year longitudinal study of 397 adolescent secondary school girls found positive associations between problematic social media use and depressive symptoms (Raudsepp and Kais, 2019). According to Bush and Russell (2016), excessive use of social media is associated with depression; continuously checking for messages, likes, and updates play a significant role in heightening anxieties and lowering self-esteem. Findings from these studies suggest that internet and social media use can have harmful effects on mental health of young people with increased frequency of use. Interestingly, findings from a UK study of 54 participants aged between 11-18 years suggested that young people believed that social media was harmful to their mental health and wellbeing (O'Reilly et al., 2018). This suggests that young people are aware of the negative effects of social media on their mental health but continue to use it. Raudsepp and Kais (2019) argue that young people with higher level of depressive symptoms may result in higher social media usage, rather than social media causing depressive symptoms. While this is a potential explanation for the correlation between social media use and mental health difficulties, more research is required in this area.

The Irish Government's Action Plan for Online Safety (2018) acknowledges the implications of social media use on mental health; including witnessing harmful content, unpleasant interactions, or spending too much time inactive. This document also acknowledges that young people often use the internet to seek help when struggling with their mental health (Government of Ireland, 2018). This plan notes the importance of the National Youth Mental Health Task Force utilising technology and the internet in delivering mental health supports to young people, and suggests a number of interventions. According to the RSPH (2017), 7 in 10 teenagers report receiving support on social media during tough or challenging times. The Irish Government outlined plans to develop online and telephone supports for young people which signpost tools for support, and has since produced a website

(yourmentalhealth.ie) which provides online mental health resources and supports (Government of Ireland, 2019). This is a welcomed approach which utilises what we know about adolescent social media use and takes the opportunity to access this cohort via a medium that is familiar to them.

2.4 Body Image and Social Comparison

According to research conducted by Lowes and Tiggemann (2003), girls report a preference for their body to be thinner from the age of 6. As noted earlier, 6-7 years is also the age that children first access the internet in Ireland (Evarri and Park, 2018). In an Irish study carried out with 2,156 participants aged between 10-21 years, two and a half times more females than males state that they were dissatisfied with their bodies (O'Connell and Martin, 2012). There are a number of factors involved with social media use which may exacerbate body image concerns disproportionately amongst girls.

According to research conducted by Burnette et al. (2017), social comparison to both peers and celebrities on social media can result in girls experiencing body dissatisfaction and appearance concerns; participants acknowledged that they engage in comparison with peers on social media, but tended to downplay this or note the harm in comparisons. According to Kleeman et al. (2016), girls are more likely to focus more on peer interactions on social media, and are more likely to compare themselves to their peers who are like them. 66% of female participants in an Irish study stated that they are most negatively influenced by comparing themselves with others in relation to their body image (O'Connell and Martin, 2012). Nonetheless, the normalisation of unrealistic body ideals is problematic, especially when many celebrities are role models for adolescent girls (Kleemans et al., 2016).

Whilst it is accepted by many adolescent girls that photos of celebrities on social media are heavily edited and photo-shopped, there is less awareness that photos of their peers and 'ordinary people' are also manipulated (Burnette et al., 2017; Kleemans et al., 2016). According to Perloff (2014), adolescent girls with pre-existing body image concerns are particularly vulnerable users of social media as they are more likely to seek out sites with pro-eating disorder rhetoric, which subsequently have numerous negative effects. Adolescent girls who have low self-esteem and body image concerns may also turn to social media for reassurance and validation purposes; however, this may have further negative effects should they receive fewer likes in comparison to their peers (Perloff, 2014).

Research conducted by O'Connell and Martin (2012) found that 70% of female participants feel pressurised to look good for others in contrast to 46% of male participants. With females more likely to choose photo and video based social media apps, it is likely that this pressure also exists online. An Australian study of 101 adolescent girls with a mean age of 13 years found that participants who regularly shared photos of themselves online reported significantly higher overvaluation of their body shape and weight as well as body dissatisfaction and dietary restraint (McLean et al., 2015). It is evident from the literature that girls experience undue pressure with regards to their physical appearance which also translates to how they experience social media.

2.5 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is described by Mesch and Talmund (2010, p.125) as an *"act of aggression, wilful and repeated harm, including nasty comments, spreading rumours, sending offensive messages and posting embarrassing clips or photographs".* According to an OECD published report (2019), 15 year olds in Ireland report experiencing cyberbullying at comparatively high rates. In an Irish study conducted with 35,867 Irish students varying in age from primary to secondary school, the majority of participants acknowledged cyberbullying as harmful (Evarri and Park, 2018). Results from this study also demonstrated an increased perception of risk of cyberbullying among female participants starting from 4th class and increasing each year; by 6th year, 72% of females stated that they consider cyberbullying as a very serious risk, in comparison with 56% of males in the same year (Evarri and Park, 2018). In the same study, 18% of participants stated that they have experienced cyberbullying (Evarri and Park, 2018). This is comparatively lower to a UK report which states that 37% of young people experience cyberbullying on a regular basis (RSPH, 2017).

According to Boyd (2014), teenagers and adults have different ideas of what constitutes as bullying; teens may be more likely to characterise something as 'drama' which adults may consider as bullying. Boyd (2014) also notes that online drama is quite gendered and is often described as a distinctly female practice. In a study of 743 teens in the USA aged between 13-17 years, 45% stated that they feel overwhelmed by the drama on social media (Pew Research Centre, 2018). It is important to note that some young people may be more vulnerable to online victimisation than others; individual risk factors include being a victim of bullying in school as well as a lack of social supports (Mesch and Talmund, 2010).

The Irish Law Reform Commission produced a report in 2016 which outlined principles for law reform relating to cyberbullying. The report described cyberbullying as *"the most serious form of harmful communication"* (Law Reform Commission, 2016, p.42). Recommendations included the repeal of the Non-Fatal Offenses Against the Person Act 1997, and advised replacement with an offense of harassment, including harmful communication online. Following this report, the Digital Safety Commissioner Bill 2017 was presented to the Dáil in November 2017; this Bill sought to establish a Digital Safety Commissioner whose role would be primarily to remove harmful digital communications. The Bill outlines that posting harmful digital communications would be prohibited by law, with a complaints scheme available for victims to request *"take down"* of harmful communications online (Digital Safety Commissioner Bill, 2017, p.5). This Bill has not progressed following the dissolution of the Dáil in 2017.

The most recently proposed Irish legislation in relation to cyberbullying is the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2019, which has been drafted in response to requirements by the revised European Union Audiovisual Media Services Directive [AVMSD] (2018). Similarly to proposals of the 2017 Bill, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2019 will see the introduction of an Online Safety Commissioner as well as a multi-person Media Commission. The 2019 Bill also seeks to develop a framework to regulate harmful online content. Part 4 of Bill addresses Online Safety and includes a description of material considered as harmful online content; including material which is likely to intimidate, threaten and humiliate.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to review the literature in the area of adolescent social media use, with particular interest to adolescent girls. The literature review begins by looking at international research discussing social media habits of adolescents; including frequency of use, favourite apps amongst this cohort, and reasons reported for use. Children are accessing social media and the internet from a young age, with the majority reportedly using social media almost constantly. The most popular apps amongst adolescents are photo and video based apps – this is consistent across European and American studies.

There are a number of dominant areas associated with social media use in the literature, including: mental health, body image and social comparison, and cyberbullying. Findings from numerous studies suggest that there is an association between excessive social media use and the development of

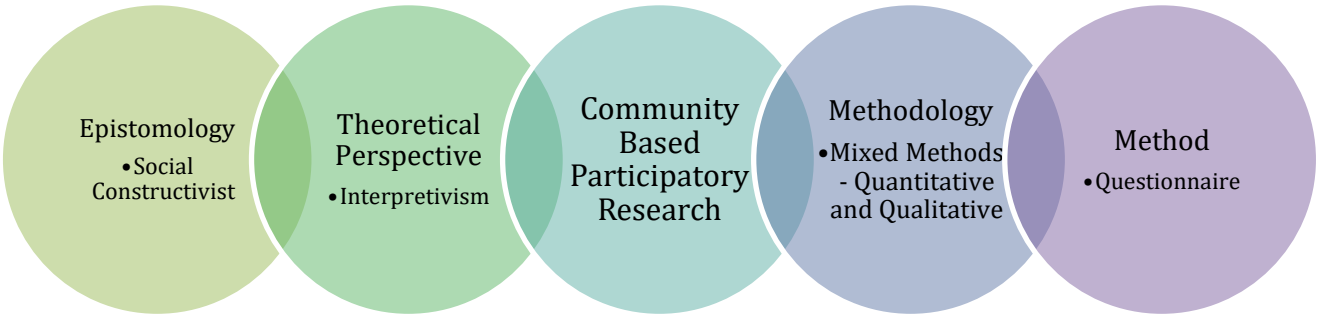
depression and anxiety. The Irish Government's approach of developing mental health supports online is also discussed. The literature also proposes that social media use has the potential to exacerbate body image concerns, especially amongst girls. The negative effects of social comparison are also acknowledged in this literature review. Cyberbullying is also addressed, with findings from numerous studies demonstrating that girls are at higher risk of cyberbullying. The Irish Government's proposed law reform which aims to protect young people from cyberbullying is also discussed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the research process. The epistemological and theoretical perspectives which informed the study will be discussed. Community based research will be acknowledged as of core importance to this dissertation, as it was conducted as part of the UCC CARL initiative. The research methodology and methods will be explained. Ethical considerations and reflexive positioning will be discussed in this chapter, as well as the challenges and limitations of this research.

Figure 1: Research Methodology



3.2 Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

Carey (2013, p.57) describes epistemology as the "theory of knowledge", referring to the different types of knowledge that exist. According to Crotty (2009, p.9), epistemology is a *"way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know"*. The epistemological positioning of this research is social constructivism. The social constructivist position assumes that individuals are responsible for constructing knowledge and understandings which ultimately creates reality (Teater, 2015). This perspective approaches the research participants from a position of curiosity and understands that

realities are individual-specific and created through social interactions (Teater, 2015). Therefore, there is no one explanation for an experience, but rather multiple realities and understandings. This is an appropriate approach for this research as it values individual perception of experiences with the focus on gathering the participants' views of their social media use and its impact upon them.

Theoretical perspective refers to the philosophical positioning which informs the methodology. This dissertation is informed by an interpretivist approach. Interpretivism refers to how we can gain knowledge and understanding of the world through interpreting the meanings that individuals apply to their actions and behaviours (O'Reilly, 2009). This is a relevant framework for this research as it values the individual experiences and narratives of participants. According to Carey (2013), an interpretivist approach seeks to understand and appreciate the diverse and unique perspectives of research participants. This perspective was chosen as I aim to develop an understanding of adolescent girls' perception of their social media use by analysing participants' narratives.

3.3 Community Based Participatory Research

This dissertation was carried out as part of the UCC CARL initiative and involved using community- based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR is *"collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects addressing community-identified needs"* (Puma et al., 2009, p.34). CBPR within the CARL initiative involves the partnership between a student and their supervisor as well as the community organisation (Bates and Burns, 2012). This research was carried out in conjunction with The Shona Project, with the founder of this community organisation shaping the topic for research, as well as supporting me with data collection and other aspects of the research design. Identification of presenting issues for The Shona Project was an integral part of determining the direction and focus of this research, to ensure that when completed it would be valuable to the organisation.

3.4 Research Methodology

Primary research was carried out for the purpose of this dissertation. Primary research involves the researcher being responsible for gathering and analysing data (Bryman, 2001). I was eager to have the opportunity to carry out primary research as there is little information on this topic available in an Irish context, and having contemporaneous data will benefit the partner organisation. A mixed methods approach to the research was decided on in collaboration with the community organisation. A mixed

methods approach refers to the *"mixing or combining of quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study"* (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins, 2009, p.115). A questionnaire was developed for the purpose of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data refers to numerical measurement of phenomenon, in contrast to qualitative data which is concerned with attitudes, behaviours and experiences of people (Carey, 2013).

Many researchers who employ a constructivist epistemological positioning tend to avoid the use of quantitative data as a preferred methodology, as it can be deemed generalising and unrepresentative of the sample; however, according to Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins (2009), using descriptive statistics can enhance qualitative data. During the process of research design, the community organisation expressed an interest in both social media habits of adolescent girls and social media content. We decided that having a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data would provide a well-rounded understanding of both logistical elements of adolescent girls' social media use (frequency, most used apps), as well as providing the participants with an opportunity to voice their opinions. The community partner's experience from seeking feedback from the target group following school workshops was that the best results are achieved from using questionnaires with Likert scales and checkbox questions, as opposed to open-ended questions. We decided to develop a questionnaire which would gather a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data as a result.

3.5 Research Methods

Carey (2013, p.33) describes research methods as *"a procedure, practice or set of techniques that is used to identify and explore research questions and a means by which to collect and analyse data, and present findings".*

3.5.1 Sampling and Data Collection

A sample refers to a *"group of research participants…drawn from a wider population and from which a degree of generalisation can be made"* (Carey, 2013, p.46). Partnering with a CARL organisation facilitated access to a sample group for data collection. The Shona Project received permission to conduct research from an all-girls secondary school in an urban centre in the South of Ireland. Permission from the school to conduct research was granted following the school principal reviewing the research design and consenting to pupils from the school being

invited to participate. The inclusion criterion was shaped by the target group of The Shona Project; all participants were individuals who identified as female and aged between 14-17 years old.

The method of data collection was chosen after much consideration and consultation with the partner agency and involved school, as the most practical and appropriate format. Data was collected via a two-page questionnaire which collected both quantitative and qualitative information. The questionnaire consisted of 8 questions which included a combination of five-point Likert scales, checkbox questions, and ranking questions. Questions also included a comment box where relevant. I included an optional comment box at the end of the questionnaire for participants to state anything they would like adults to know about social media. The majority of the qualitative data was gathered from this section of the questionnaire. While designing the questionnaire, the community partner and I were in regular dialogue in relation to the wording of questions which ultimately shaped the questionnaire.

200 information sheets and parental and participant consent forms were attached to the questionnaire and distributed by a teacher in the school to students to bring home to their parents. 98 completed questionnaires and consent forms and were subsequently collected from the school by The Shona Project. I hoped to gather a sample of approximately 100 girls as I felt that this would be a manageable number to analyse given the time constraints of the dissertation, whilst providing a reliable spread of data.

A number of alternative data collection options were considered; I initially hoped to gather a larger sample of participants by attending the yearly conference held by The Shona Project and distributing hard-copy questionnaires. Up to 1,000 secondary school girls attended SHINE19, The Shona Project's 2019 conference. The theme of the 2019 conference was a celebration of the International Day of the Girl. Speakers attended and addressed topics such as overcoming challenges, mental health, body positivity and kindness. However, my research partner and I agreed that seeking parental consent for the attendees to participate in the research in advance of this event would be difficult to organise. In line with the DCYA (2012) Guidance Document for Developing Ethical Research Projects, I followed accepted ethical guidelines for ensuring best practice when seeking to invite minors to participate in a research project with regards to

seeking parental consent and participant assent. The community organisation and I also considered creating an online questionnaire which could be distributed to followers of The Shona Project's social media channels. However, following discussion we decided that this would not be a representative sample and it would be more likely for participants to be biased. It was determined that bias would be an issue in this circumstance as online followers of The Shona Project would be regular consumers of The Shona Project's positive content and as a result, may experience social media in a different way. We agreed that a sample from the general population within the target group would be more accurate.

While online questionnaires would have been practical for data analysis, it was not possible to seek parental consent through this format. We opted to gather a sample from a secondary school as it would reach a broader range of participants who are within The Shona Project's target group. Through discussion we also determined that we would be more likely to collect a larger sample if the questionnaires were completed in school during class time.

3.5.2 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using IBM statistical analysis software *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) for the purpose of generating descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics refers to describing what the data shows. For the purpose of this research, quantitative data was presented using univariate analysis; this involves analysing one variable at a time as opposed to bivariate analysis, which seeks to establish correlations between variables (Bryman, 2012). This approach was chosen as I believe that the qualitative data which was gathered demonstrated the participants' perceptions of their social media use quite powerfully, and chose to focus on thematically analysing this data while providing the quantitative data results as context. The raw data will be available to the community organisation should they seek it for further analysis in future research.

Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. According to Hart (2009, p.166), thematic analysis involves *"bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which are often meaningless when voiced alone".* Themes were extracted by reading through responses to the questionnaire and identifying patterns across participants' explanations of their experiences of social media. This was achieved by manually colour coding the data; codes

emerged through the repeated reading and re-reading of the data and were subsequently interpreted with regard to the aim and objectives of the study (Carey, 2013). Five themes were interpreted and examined in conjunction with the literature and are presented in the findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As a researcher I recognise the importance of considering ethical implications attached to carrying out research. I applied to the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) for ethical approval prior to beginning my research. My application was approved with minor comments on the 8th October 2019. Changes were implemented based on comments, which were mainly concerned with clarity regarding withdrawal of participation and anonymity of participants. As recommended, participants were advised that consent can be withdrawn up until the point of questionnaire collection. A separate assent form and information sheet for participants was also provided as advised by the committee.

I am aware that children and young people are vulnerable research participants and I put a number of measures in place to ensure protection from harm. In line with the Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects (DCYA 2012), I sought both parental consent and child's assent to participate in the research. Consent sheets emphasised to the parents and participants that completing the questionnaire was voluntary with no repercussions if they chose not to participate. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any question that they were uncomfortable with. Details about the research were distributed to parents to allow them to make an informed choice about providing their consent, as well as ensuring that the young people could give informed assent. I provided contact details on the information sheet for support services should any child experience any distress as a result of their participation. Contact details were available on the information sheets for both my academic supervisor and I should any queries arise.

I familiarised myself with the UCC Child Safeguarding Statement and I am aware of my responsibilities and legal requirements as outlined by the Children First Act (2015). I ensured that no child's comments or data are identifiable in my dissertation. I anonymised each questionnaire by allocating each a number; direct quotes from participants are referred to by the allocated number in the findings.

3.7 Reflexive Positioning

Reflexive positioning refers *to "the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the collected data, including the role of prior assumptions and experience, which can influence even the most avowedly inductive inquiries"* (Mays & Pope, 2000, p. 81). According to Sword (1999), it is not possible for research to be free from all assumptions, bias, or personality of the researcher. I acknowledge that as a feminist, I have an interest in the distinct female experience which is the focus of this dissertation. I recall my own experience as an adolescent using social media, and while it was not exceptionally positive or negative, I am aware that my own experience could shape my enquiry. I also worked with adolescent girls during my first MSW placement in a school completion project, where the students were very open in discussing their experiences of social media with me. My curiosity has equally been guided by The Shona Project and my academic supervisor, who were very helpful in defining the focus of the research.

3.8 Challenges and Limitations

This research was limited by both time constraints and word count. A number of challenges were involved with regard to ethical implications of conducting research with minors. In my initial research proposal, I had perhaps naively not realised that parental consent would be necessary if I sought access to participants via questionnaire as opposed to interview. I had initially hoped to gather a larger sample of participants, and this informed my decision to conduct questionnaires. On reflection, it would have been interesting to conduct focus groups or interviews with participants to ask them directly about their opinions regarding social media use. I am aware that there is only so much detail that can be gathered through the medium of questionnaire. Another limitation is that the sample was gathered from one school; I had initially hoped for the sample to include a number of schools for a broader perspective. However, within the time limits available, the community partner identified that access to just one school, but one with a large student cohort, would be the most feasible option.

My initial research hypothesis included an interest in resilience development as a method to support adolescent girls in their social media use. However, my data analysis indicated that the majority of participants involved in this research are quite resilient in fact, and this focus was no longer the most significant theme of interest.

It was not possible to analyse the data set in its entirety within the time and resource limits, and as described earlier there was a focus on providing descriptive statistics from the quantitative data and further exploration of the qualitative data through thematic analysis. The quantitative data will remain available to the community partner should they wish to undertake a further analysis of this.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology of this research. The epistemological and theoretical perspectives of social constructivism and interpretivism were outlined as the framework of the dissertation, as well as the role of CBPR. The research methodology and methods involved in this research were discussed with explanations provided for the chosen approaches. Reflexive positioning and ethical considerations were acknowledged, as well as outlining the challenges and limitations of this study.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline and discuss the findings of the data collection outlined in chapter three in conjunction with the literature. Quantitative data will first be outlined and discussed. Qualitative data was thematically analysed and grouped into the following categories which will be discussed in this chapter:

- Using social media to keep in contact with friends and family
- Adult misperceptions of social media
- Responsible social media use
- Social media as a positive influence
- Concerns regarding social media

The themes were generated from qualitative responses, including answers to an open-ended question inviting participants to comment with anything that they wish adults knew about social media. This section of this dissertation will address my second research question: what do teenage girls perceive to be the impact of social media use on their lives?

4.2 Female Adolescent Social Media Habits

Participants' social media habits were gathered through a number of questions which established the following: the main apps used, the frequency of social media use, reasons for using social media apps, reasons for following someone on social media, as well as the perceived effects of social media on mood.

4.2.1 Most Frequently Used Social Media Apps

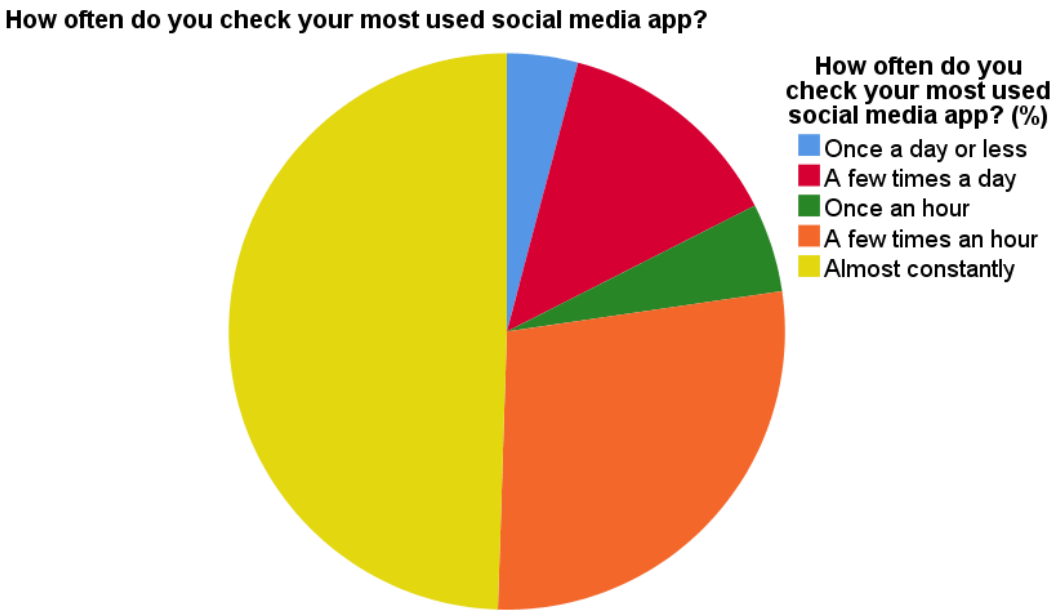
When asked to number their most frequently used app, 60.2% of participants stated Snapchat. 35% of participants stated that Instagram was their second most used app. 27.6% of participants also selected Instagram as their third most used app, followed by Tiktok with 20.4% selecting it as their third most used app. Participants also had the option of naming other apps they use which were not included in the options provided by the researcher; 14.3% listed VSCO as an app they use. 10% also included Whatsapp, with Discord, Gmail, and Youtube also mentioned. The most used apps by this sample were

predominantly visual apps used for sharing pictures and videos. Similar findings were evident in research carried out in the United States of America by Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017), and independent media and technology organisation Common Sense (2018), where Instagram and Snapchat were the most popular apps in both studies.

4.2.2 Frequency of Social Media App Use

49% of participants stated that they check their favourite social media app 'almost constantly', with a further 27.6% checking this 'a few times an hour'. Other variations in comments included *"depends on the day"* (P.1), *"whenever I get messages"* (P.3), *and "whenever I'm not doing anything"* (P.79). All participants stated that they used social media every day; this is in line with the findings of a previous American study in which 92% of 13-17 year old participants stated that they used social media on a daily basis (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

Figure 2: Frequency of Social Media App Use



4.2.3 Reasons for Social Media Use

The majority of participants stated that they use social media apps to keep in contact with friends and family (n=88). When participants were asked to comment on anything they wished adults knew about social media, a number of participants stated that they use social media to keep in contact with friends. A significant number of participants (69.4%) also stated that they use social media in order to pass the time. Liking and favouriting posts (60.2%) and sharing pictures (59.2%) were also rated highly as reasons for using social media. Other reasons given included for future careers, to keep up to date with what celebrities are doing, as well as *"to learn about social issues"* (P.95).

Figure 3: Reasons for using social media.

		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Participants
Why do you use these social media apps?[a]	To keep in contact with friends/family	88	22.6%	89.8%
	To interact with new people	28	7.2%	28.6%
	To share pictures	58	14.9%	59.2%
	To like/favourite posts	59	15.1%	60.2%
	To follow news/gossip and trends	55	14.1%	56.1%
	To organise events	17	4.4%	17.3%
	To make me feel better	17	4.4%	17.3%
	To pass the time	68	17.4%	69.4%
Total		390	100.0%	398.0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

4.2.4 Reasons for Following Someone on Social Media

To 'follow' someone on social media refers to the person choosing to see the posts and content of another person's social media profile. Social media users can choose to follow friends, acquaintances, and celebrities.

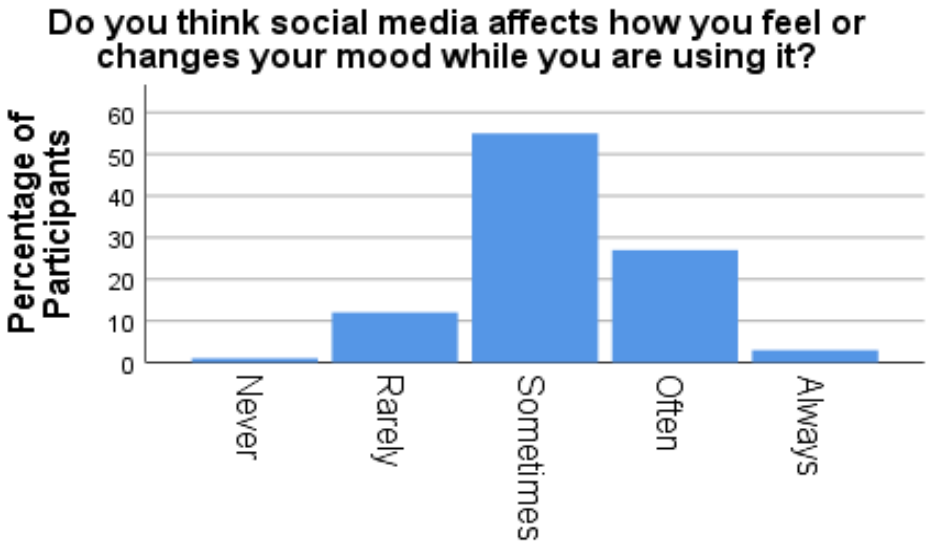
74.5% of participants stated that their main reason for following someone on social media is 'because they are my friend'. When asked their second reason to follow someone on social media, 27.6% selected 'because they inspire me'. 20.4% of participants selected 'because I relate to them' as their

third reason for following someone on social media. One participant stated that they follow people on social media because *"I enjoy the content they put out e.g fashion, music."* (P.95). Other participants also referenced following people on social media as they are a fan of their work, because they're famous, or they make them laugh. One participant stated that they follow people on social media because *"they motivate me to be a better person"* (P.17).

4.2.5 Effect of Social Media on Mood

The majority of participants acknowledged that social media has the ability to affect their mood and how they feel to some extent. 56% of participants stated that they think social media changes how they feel or changes their mood while they are using it 'sometimes'. A further 27.6% stated that social media changes how they feel or changes their mood 'often'.

Figure 4: Change of mood when using social media

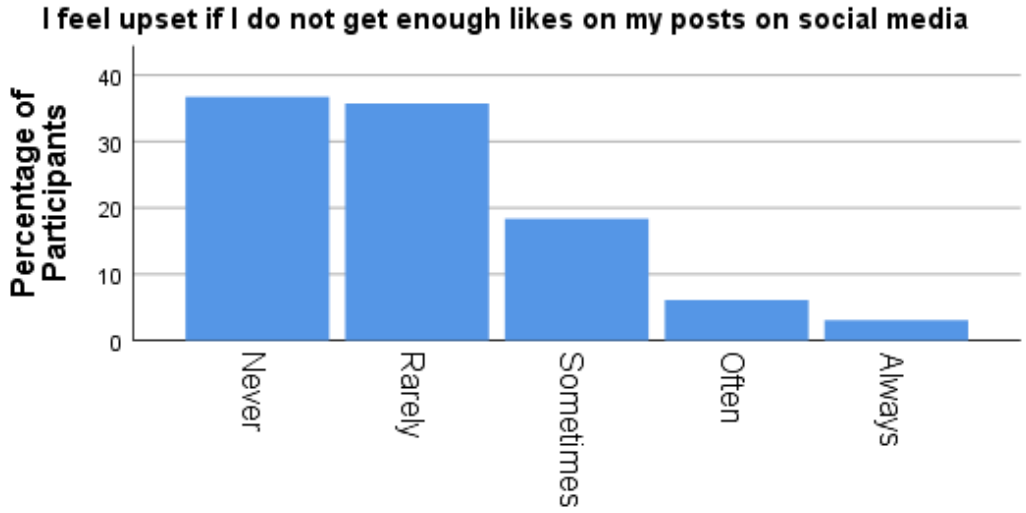


When participants were asked their most frequent feeling when using social media, 64.3% stated 'happy'. 26.5% stated that their second most frequent feeling is 'motivated'. The third most frequent feeling experienced when using social media is tied between feeling 'included' and 'fear of missing out', with 14.3% of participants each. Other feelings commented which were not provided as options by the researcher included *"inspired", "normal", "hyper", "self-conscious",* and *"sociable".* One participant commented that how they feel when using social media *"depends on what I'm seeing"* (P.74). Another

participant noted that their feelings when using social media *"depends on the day"* (P.34). The majority of participants selected that they experience primarily positive feelings when using social media. According to research carried out by the organisation Common Sense (2018), teenagers are more likely to say that social media has a positive rather than negative effect on how they feel.

On the subject of 'likes' on social media, 36.7% of participants stated that they 'never' feel upset if they do not receive enough likes on their posts on social media. A further 35.7% of participants stated that they 'rarely' feel upset if they do not receive enough likes on their posts. It is possible that social desirability bias impacted participants' choice of answer to this question in particular. Social desirability bias refers to when research participants choose answers which they believe are socially desirable rather than a true reflection of their beliefs (Grimm, 2010). A strong theme within the data from this research is that adolescent girls believe that social media is not as bad as adults perceive it to be. It is possible that by stating that not receiving sufficient likes on social media is upsetting, this would portray social media use in a negative, more harmful light. According to research conducted by Dalton and Ortegren (2011), there is a tendency for women to respond to research in a more socially desirable fashion in comparison with men. It could be the case that participants may not feel comfortable connecting social media use with upset, especially since many of the participants made a strong case for the positives of social media.

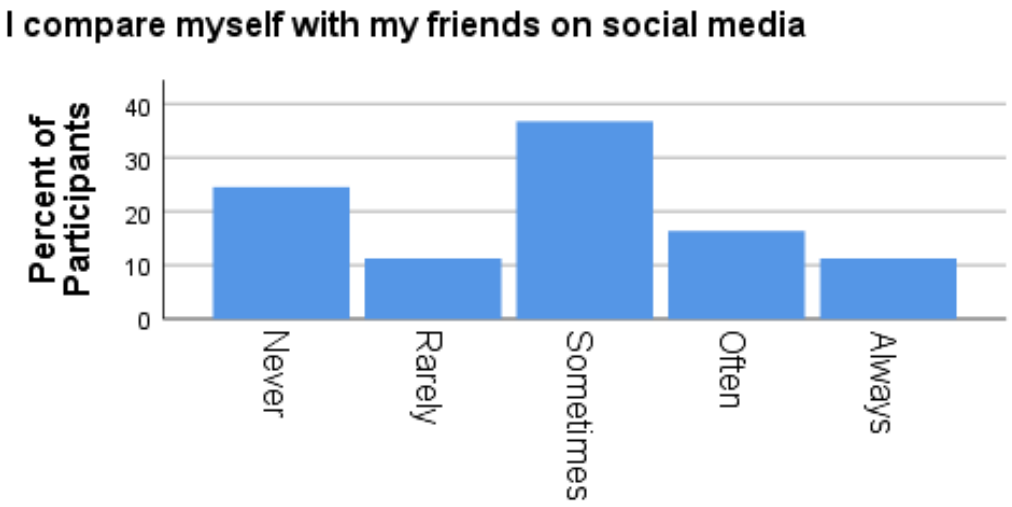
Figure 5: Reaction to 'likes' on social media posts



4.2.6 Social Media and Social Comparison

The majority of participants (n=74) acknowledged that they compare themselves with their friends on social media to some extent, varying from 'rarely' to 'always'. 36.7% of participants stated that they compare themselves with their friends on social media 'sometimes'. However, 24.5% of participants stated that they 'never' compare themselves with their friends on social media. Studies have shown that girls actually focus more on peer interactions on social media, and are more likely to compare themselves to their peers who are like them, than to celebrities (Kleemans et al., 2016). One participant noted that *"just because I compare myself to my friends doesn't mean it's in a negative way"* (P.71). This is an interesting comment in view of my discussion above relating to social desirability bias – with the majority of participants expressing that social media is a positive presence in their lives, this participant appears to be communicating that social comparison amongst friends on social media is something that does not necessarily have negative effects. This is in contrast to the literature in this area which I address in Chapter Two; reportedly, social comparison through social media can result in significant body image concerns as well as pressure with regards to physical appearance. However, this participant does not appear to be connecting social comparison with the known negative affects; it is possible that the participant felt the need to make this distinction as it would otherwise portray social media in a negative light.

Figure 6: Social comparison with friends



Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

4.3 Theme One: Using Social Media to Keep in Contact with Friends and Family.

The findings from this research indicate that adolescent girls primarily use social media to keep in contact with friends and family. This is evident from quantitative results from this research outlined previously, with the vast majority of participants (89.9%) selecting 'to keep in contact with friends and family' as a reason for using social media. This is reflected further in data collected in the qualitative section of the questionnaire which gave participants an opportunity to have their voice heard in relation to what they would like adults to know about social media. A number of participants noted that irrespective of what adults may believe, social media is a useful medium to keep in contact with friends. One participant noted the following:

> *"Personally I see it as a way to communicate with friends much easier"* (P.37).

One participant acknowledged the perceived adult preconceptions associated with adolescent girls' social media use as involving the practice of taking photographs or 'selfies':

> *"We don't all go on social media to look good. Sometimes we like to keep in contact with our friends"* (P.1).

The online connectedness which social media facilitates is acknowledged by one participant:

> *"It's an excellent way to keep in touch with friends and family that may live far away"* (P.72).

4.3.1 Discussion

Data collected in this study indicates that the participants' primary reason for using social media apps is to keep in contact with friends and family. Snapchat is the most commonly used app, with 60.2% of participants selecting it as their first preference. Instagram follows, with 27.6% of participants choosing it as their second preference. Both apps are primarily photo based apps which also have private messaging features.

Participants appear to be using photo based apps for communicating with friends and family. Participant 1 acknowledges the preconception that adults may have regarding teenagers taking photos for vanity purposes, but explains this as a method of communication. Snapchat's website (2020) describes the app as *"a new kind of camera that's connected to your friends and the world".* The website also highlights the convenience of sending a photo to convey a message; *"A picture's worth a thousand texts … you can send friends a quick photo or video of what's going on, without having to type out a whole message."* Participant 72 acknowledges the practical connectedness which social media provides, allowing for contact with friends and family who do not live locally. Instagram's website (2020) similarly states that it functions as a *"free photo and video sharing app … people can upload photos or videos to our service and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends."*

Research conducted by the organisation Common Sense (2018) concluded that there has been an increase in using social media apps as a preferred method of communication between 2012 and 2018. The ease of communication as described by participant 37 is a likely explanation for this increase. With the majority of social media apps operating on an immediate, 'real-time' basis, this may be considered as a more practical way of communicating for adolescents. The broad scale use of social media apps has allowed more opportunities for adolescent girls to *"connect, communicate and interact"* with each other (Allen et al., 2014, p.19).

At the time of writing, a global pandemic has engulfed most of the world. A Coronavirus outbreak has resulted in the closure of all non-essential services in Ireland, including schools. Strict directions are in place which restricts movement and contact with other people. Many people have turned to using social media in order to keep in contact with each other. It has been quite an alien and isolating experience for Irish people as they have been forced to remain apart from friends and family who do not reside with them. Interestingly, with young people already utilising social media to stay in touch with family and friends, there's a possibility that they are more prepared for remaining in contact with people through this medium and may not find the adjustment as difficult as adults. It is possible that being *digital natives* may act as a protective factor for young people in these extraordinary times.

4.4 Theme Two: 'It's not all bad' – Adult Misperceptions of Social Media

A significant theme present within the qualitative data is that adolescent girls want adults to know that social media does not deserve its overly negative reputation:

> *"It's not as bad as some people make it out to be"* (P. 62).

14 variations of the above comment were recorded; it appears that many participants involved in this research felt strongly about the wider adult perception of social media. The suggestion is that the negative ideas which adults hold about social media supersede the reality, with one participant noting:

> *"Sometimes social media has a positive influence on our lives. I think most adults have a negative view of social media"* (P.43).

A perceived lack of adult understanding about adolescent social media use was cited, with one participant viewing it as a part of social evolution:

> *"We're not addicted to our phones, it's a new society"* (P.34).

Another participant refers to the differing societal norms relating to childhood and adolescence now in comparison to when today's adults were growing up; likening outdoor play to using social media:

> *"I think social media is a platform that young people enjoy. In the olden days many adults played outside etc, social media is the fun and play of our time. I wish adults could understand social media like this"* (P.56).

It is commonplace that many parents warn their children of the risks of social media use. It is reflected within this research that a number of participants consider these risks as inflated worries or exaggerations rather than realistic risks. One participant acknowledges this as follows:

> *"Not everybody online is a predator and there are actual decent people there"* (P.46).

Another participant stated similarly:

> *"You don't just talk to random people and it's not just a place for catfish and creepy old men"* (P.73).

Several participants acknowledged the lack of understanding some adults have of the logistics of adolescent social media use. One participant expressed their desire for adult understanding of terms associated with social media use, likely referring to parents or guardians:

> *"I wish they knew what I mean when I say I'm snapping someone"* (P.54).

Another participant refers to the fast-paced nature of social media trends and activity, and the lack of understanding that adults can have in relation to this:

> *"It's not like a game that you can just pause and continue later. It's very fast and things come and go quickly"* (P.74).

4.4.1 Discussion

Participants expressed a strong sense that they believe adults see adolescent social media use in an unduly negative light. This could be informed by how their parents and guardians or other adults in their lives react to their individual social media use. The quantitative data gathered shows that a large proportion of participants use social media 'almost constantly'; this could be interpreted by parents or guardians as excessive and responded to as such. Participants expressed their frustrations with adults' lack of understanding surrounding social media use; both the logistics of this use, as well as what is considered as acceptable or normal. According to a study conducted in the USA which analysed 399 print and online news articles, findings suggest that journalists consistently positioned teens and social media at odds with each other (Stern and Odland, 2017). Findings from this study by Stern and Odland (2017) found that teenage social media use is frequently framed as unhealthy and dangerous, with little to no discussion of teenagers utilising social media for self-expression, creativity, or simply

communication. It is possible that news and publications disproportionally report the negatives of adolescent social media, which have potential to create excessive concern amongst parents and guardians.

Interestingly, parental monitoring of social media was not mentioned in this research despite evidence from other studies suggesting that this is an issue for many adolescents (Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo, 2017). The issue of invasion of privacy also did not present in this research, however it may be informing the participants' perceptions of adult ideas surrounding social media use. It is common for teenagers to experience feelings of resentment towards parents for monitoring their online behaviour (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013). While participants feel adults have a negative view of adolescent social media use, The Brown University (2014) advises parents to have a balanced and informed knowledge of both the risks and benefits of social media use and engage in communication with their social media-using teenagers. Open communication is also advised by Miller (2011), along with encouragement of online safety and establishing ground rules. This is echoed in the findings of this study; a number of participants expressed that they want adults to show an interest in their activities on social media. Participants expressed that they wished adults understood the logistics of how social media works as well as the language associated with social media.

According to The Brown University (2014), teenagers are more receptive to user-empowered strategies rather than parental 'policing' of social. A social media informed approach by parents and guardians which incorporates open communication with their children would be beneficial in supporting adolescents in their social media use rather than an approach which demonises social media use. There is significant potential for social media to bridge the generations in a way that is mutually educational and supportive.

4.5 Theme Thee: Responsible Social Media Use

Another strong theme within the qualitative data is the acknowledgement that social media has the potential to be negative, depending on how it is used. One participant described this very aptly as:

> *"It's not social media that's negative, it's how you use it ☺"* (P.95).

Another participant acknowledges the risks involved with social media use for teenagers should they incorrectly use or over-use social media:

> *"Once teenagers know what shouldn't be done, social media is quite great. Yes a few teens don't know how much is too much or get put down by 'influencers', but not all"* (P.37).

There appears to be an awareness of correct and incorrect social media practices; the majority of participants believe that social media is primarily positive, but there is potential for misuse. One participant acknowledges this as:

> *"Social media isn't all bad, only some people use it as a negative platform"* (P.86).

4.5.1 Discussion

A significant number of participants expressed an awareness of 'correct' and 'incorrect' social media use, which is suggested as the responsibility of the individual and how they use social media. It appears that participants are aware that social media has the potential to be harmful to adolescents who use it, but believe that those who experience negative effects of social media are not using it responsibly.

Young people today have grown up with social media and technology as an integral and normalised part of life. However, being a *"digital native"* does not equate to having digital literacy (National Youth Council Ireland, 2017, P.5). As discussed in the literature review, there are many known harmful effects of adolescent social media use, namely on adolescent mental health and self-esteem. Many of the known harmful effects of social media did not feature in the data collected in this research. It is important to note that all young people are not equally resilient to these harmful effects and while the data collected in this research suggests that the majority of participants feel that social media is a positive part of their lives, there are a number who note their concerns regarding social media use. According to research conducted by Common Sense (2018), teenagers with low social-emotional well-being are more prone to experiencing the negative effects of social media than their peers who may have higher social-emotional well-being. It is possible that some participants may be more resilient to

the effects of social media use than others, and as a result their perception of social media use as a whole is based on their individual experience which is reportedly largely positive.

4.6 Theme Four: Social Media as a Positive Influence

Many participants used the opportunity to comment what they would like adults to know about social media to assert that they believe social media has a positive influence on their lives. One participant noted that they use social media to follow people who motivate them and as a result improve their mood:

> *"Finding the right motivators or influencers that bring you up is the best feeling"* (P.37).

A number of participants expressed that they find social media useful for educational and learning purposes. One participant noted the positive educational impact which social media has for them:

> *"It can be a great tool to share thoughts and opinions and to learn more. It can be motivating and inspiring"* (P.95).

Another participant also acknowledged social media as a source of information about real-world events:

> *"It's hugely educational – so much access to information and real life events that the news won't report on"* (P.96).

Findings from the quantitative data collected in this research suggests that the majority of participants experience positive feelings when using social media; as outlined earlier, 64.3% stated 'happy' as their most frequent feeling. A further 26.5% stated that their second most frequent feeling is 'motivated'. While the majority of participants stated that their primary reason for using social media is to keep in contact with friends and family, when asked their second reason to follow someone on social media, 27.6% selected 'because they inspire me'.

4.6.1 Discussion

Both quantitative and qualitative data collected for this research identifies the majority of participants' experience of social media as positive. The positive effects referred to by participants include an improvement in mood, a source of motivation and inspiration, as well as a source of educational and informative content.

There is potential for social media to be utilised as a source of educational content to adolescents on topics which may not be prioritised in the formal education system. Social media apps can be the first avenue for adolescents to engage with informal learning of content on topics such as activism, social justice, feminism, and sexuality (Kim and Ringrose, 2018). However, the positive learning potential of social media among adolescents continues to be not well understood due to the perception of social media as having primarily negative effects, as well as policies in schools which position social media as a source of danger (Kim and Ringrose, 2018). One example of social media being utilised to educate young people on the topic of sexual consent involved the partnership of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and TikTok influencers who have large followings of young people on this platform (Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2020). The #100Consent campaign involved 22 influencers partaking in a day of workshops to educate them on the topic of sexual consent and relationships and subsequently spreading this message through entertaining and creative TikTok videos.

Findings from research conducted by the RSPH (2017, p.14) found that social media can operate as an avenue for self-expression and exploration, with adolescents creating an *"identity catalogue"* that represents their personality. The potential for social media as a purveyor of inspiration and motivation for young people is significant, with all participants of this research using social media on a daily basis. Organisations such as The Shona Project have an invaluable platform to reach adolescent girls on social media apps which increase the positive content that young people are consuming.

The Shona Project recently featured in the six part docuseries *'Changing Ireland: My Big Idea'* (2020), produced by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland and aired on RTÉ One. In episode three, a group of girls who are involved with The Shona Project met with the founder and discussed the impact of The Shona Project on their lives; one of the girls described The Shona Project as like a family, noting the support they receive from their content. One of the girls spoke about her experience of depression and feeling alone until finding The Shona Project and learning that others share her experience. The opportunity to

learn about things through The Shona Project was described as empowering, as well as having the opportunity to contribute to the website and social media giving the girls a voice. The Shona Project is certainly a prime example of how we can harness the positive aspects of social media and utilise this medium of accessing young people to provide support.

4.7 Theme Five: Concerns regarding Social Media

While the majority of participants noted their positive experiences with social media use, a number of concerns about social media use were also highlighted. A concern for one participant was the materialistic envy experienced by some young people as a result of posts on social media:

> *"Younger people want to get stuff because they see others have it"* (P.4).

Bullying is notably a concern for several participants, with one stating that parents and guardians should *"keep on checking their phones to make sure of bullying"* (P.16). A number of apps have functions which allow for anonymity on social media. One participant noted that anonymity on social media can pose risks:

> *"The swipe up anonymous link on Snapchat that teenagers do leads to bullying"* (P.18).

Another participant notes that adults should be more aware of their children's social media activity, potentially in relation to bullying:

> *"Wish adults were more aware about what their children post on social media"* (P.68).

Several participants are aware and critical of how artificial social media can be with one expressing her concern relating to this:

> *"Almost everything you see on them is fake. I think this needs to stop"* (P.44).

Another participant also acknowledges the 'fake' nature of social media by commenting that social media profiles function as a person's portrayal of their ideal self:

> *"In general, social media is used to boost people's egos and allow them to pretend to be whoever they wish they could be"* (P.65).

The potentially addictive nature of social media was also recognised:

> *"Social media is an addictive game for anyone who can't stop it"* (P.2).

The consequence of having an online presence is acknowledged by one participant as a concerning reality of being permitted by parents or guardians to use social media from early adolescence:

> *"I wish it was never invented. Digital footprint is scary and I wish I was never allowed on it at the age of 12"* (P.61).

Some participants commented that they frequently struggle to deal with social media:

> *"Social media can be very hard to deal with sometimes, and teens tend to feel a lot of pressure"* (P.78).

4.7.1 Discussion

Participants expressed a number of concerns regarding the use of social media. The issue of online bullying is particularly concerning for both young people and their parents. However, parents generally assume that social media radically increases instances of bullying; research on the topic suggests that this is not the case (Boyd, 2014). It is possible that the general problem of adolescent bullying has additionally moved online, rather than online bullying being caused by using social media apps. There is also potential for disinhibition online due to the added anonymity features in some apps (Mesch and Talmud, 2010).

It is likely that despite experiencing the negative effects of social media, many adolescents will continue to use social media apps. By building digital resilience in adolescents, they may be able to learn skills which would support them during negative online experiences. Young people with higher levels of digital literacy and resilience are better able to mitigate the impact of negative online experiences and as a result 'bounce back' quicker (YoungMinds, 2016). Research by YoungMinds (2016) suggests that this can be achieved by developing online spaces and behavioural tools, as well as ensuring easy access to informed support to enable young people to manage their mental health and wellbeing efficiently. An effective approach would also incorporate young people, parents, school curricula, as well as other professionals who work closely with adolescents.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the questionnaire. Qualitative findings have been separated into five key themes following thematic analysis of primarily an open question asking participants to share what they would like adults to know about social media. Themes have been outlined and subsequently discussed. This research has outlined the social media habits of female adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17, in terms of frequency of use as well as choice of social media apps. The qualitative findings have demonstrated a number of perceptions that these adolescent girls have of their social media use and how it affects them.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide concluding comments arising from the research aims and findings. A number of recommendations, as well as potential future topics for research in this area will be presented. This chapter will conclude with a reflective piece addressing my experience as a researcher as well as the process of engaging in a CARL project.

5.2 Concluding Comments

The aim of this research was to collect a snapshot of the social media habits of adolescent girls in Ireland, specifically in relation to how social media affects mood and self-esteem. This research also aimed to learn about what adolescent girls perceive to be the effect of social media on their lives. This was achieved through analysis of primary data collected through questionnaires.

The social media habits of participants were explored and findings were in line with similar studies outlined in the literature review. The top three most popular apps were primarily visual apps and included Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. All participants used social media every day, with half using social media almost constantly. The majority of participants stated that they use social media for communicative purposes, to keep in contact with family and friends; this is also a theme further emphasised in the qualitative data. The most common reason for following someone on social media was 'because they are my friend'.

The majority of participants acknowledged that social media has the ability to affect mood to varying extents; 'happy' and 'motivated' were the most reported feelings experienced when using social media. Most participants reported that receiving less 'likes' than desired on their social media posts never and rarely makes them feel upset. The majority of participants acknowledged that they compare themselves to their friends on media to some extent.

A number of strong themes were present in the qualitative findings which demonstrated participants' perceptions of how social media affects their lives. While findings from the literature review demonstrated significant implications associated with adolescent social media use, notably to mental health and wellbeing, this was not apparent in the findings of this study. The majority of participants reported positive experiences of social media, including using it as a tool for communication and as a

source of inspiration, motivation and education. Participants reported feeling that adults have an unduly negative view of adolescent social media use as well as a lack of understanding of the logistics of social media. A number of participants expressed a desire for adults to take interest in and gain understanding of their social media use, in contrast to seeing social media use as a negative and harmful activity for young people.

It is evident that participants had an awareness of the risks associated with social media, including what is considered as correct and incorrect use. However, concerns relating to social media use presented as a theme in the findings; a number of participants reported concerns about cyberbullying and anonymity online, fake content, addictive potential, digital footprint, and social pressure. My third research question sought to identify the potential for resilience development interventions in supporting social media use amongst adolescent girls; while concern relating to resilience of participants was an anticipated outcome of this research, it did not present as a main theme. Nonetheless, findings of this study suggest that some adolescent girls may be more resilient to the effects of social media than others. Interventions which promote digital literacy and resilience have the potential to mitigate the negative effects associated with social media use amongst adolescents.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this empirical study in conjunction with the literature.

- Participants expressed that they feel that adults have a disproportionately negative view of their social media use; findings included references to adults' lack of understanding of adolescent social media use and the general logistics of social media. Young people and their parents and guardians should be encouraged to bridge the gap that exists with regards to social media use – open communication may result in parents and guardians feeling less concerned, and adolescents would feel more supported and trusted, which would build their resilience towards negative effects of social media. Improving parents' understanding of adolescent social media use could be achieved through meetings in schools where parents who have experience in the area could present information about different social media platforms including what they do and how to use them. Parents would subsequently feel more confident in their knowledge base when communicating with their young people about social media. Alternatively, schools and/or

organisations such as The Shona Project who are knowledgeable in the area of social media could create 'cheat sheets' or support videos for parents and guardians, explaining the different social media platforms and the terminology associated with them.

- Participants have expressed that they want adults to show an interest in their online activities without assuming that it is something inherently negative. There is potential for schools and parents' associations to collaborate with and provide a platform to students to voice their experiences of social media and educate adults in an area in which their understanding may be limited. This could be achieved through evening workshops in schools a few times a year, where parents and guardians are invited to hear students discuss their use of social media and how they keep themselves safe online. This would be a mutually educational and supportive opportunity for parents and students.

- Findings have demonstrated the unique position for organisations such as The Shona Project to access young people through platforms in which they are most familiar and using frequently. Participants have stated that they use social media as a source of motivation, inspiration and education; organisations and professionals working with young people should be aware of the potential for social media to be utilised to provide support and information to this cohort.

- It is evident from the findings that whilst the majority of participants reported positive experiences of social media, a number of concerns were reported also. School based interventions which promote digital literacy and resilience should be provided from early primary school level and throughout secondary school to mitigate the possible negative effects of social media outlined in the literature review and findings. As it is likely that adolescents will continue to use social media, it is important that they are supported to do so safety and responsibly.

5.4 Future Research

The data gathered from this research will remain available should The Shona Project seek to analyse it further. This could be an option for further CARL projects in collaboration with The Shona Project. It

would be interesting to determine if any correlations exist between quantitative questions relating to social media use, mood and self-esteem.

An interesting area to study following from this research would be an investigation into effective ways to reach young people online through social media, especially in light of EU research relating to digital youth work (National Youth Council Ireland, 2017). Further exploration of strategies to bridge the communication and understanding gap between adolescents and the adults in their lives, about the positive uses and effects of social media, would also be worthwhile.

5.5 Reflective Piece

When I began the process of this research by applying for the CARL initiative in May 2019, I felt very excited about the prospect of partnering with a community organisation to complete a piece of research. It has certainly felt like a marathon since then. My interest and enthusiasm for the topic has remained (thankfully) from start to finish. Each day I worked on this project I felt like I was learning something new. It has been quite a lengthy process, and as it has been so gradual it is easy to forget all the work that went in along the way before I began writing. Over the summer holidays I created the questionnaires and information and consent sheets to carry out the research while liaising with my tutor and the founder of The Shona Project. While I was on my second MSW placement I was simultaneously completing college work for my portfolio and putting together my SREC application to secure ethical approval for the research. This research and the MSW in general have taught me that I am capable of managing and prioritising work and ensuring that I abide by deadlines. On a number of occasions, I had to *press pause* on working on the dissertation in order to complete my placement portfolio or to finish essays; I am relieved at this point that it was not a major sprint. This is a skill which I hope to bring forward into my social work career.

On reflection, the part I found most difficult was keeping the research focused; the research has certainly evolved from my initial research proposal. I am glad that I partnered with The Shona Project, as choosing my own topic admittedly appeared quite daunting at the beginning. I preferred to have a focus which was shaped by what was relevant and useful to The Shona Project. As mentioned in the research, I was familiar with The Shona Project prior to partnering with them for this research. Throughout this research I have become so impressed with how innovative their approach is. I have thought many times that I wish their presence online existed when I was a teenager. I really believe in

their work and I am proud of myself for being able to produce this dissertation with their support and contribution.

The aspect of this research process that I enjoyed the most was the qualitative data analysis. It was the first time I had the opportunity to complete primary research and I was unsure how successful data collection would be. I hoped to receive 100 completed questionnaires as I felt that this would be a manageable number to analyse, as well as broad enough to find themes. I was delighted to receive 98 questionnaires back; and even more delighted when I first read through them. I felt that the girls who partook in the research answered the questions honestly and openly. Looking back now, I regret not having the opportunity to carry out focus groups or interviews. I am aware that only so much information can be gathered in a questionnaire format. I am happy with the responses received but would have liked to explore their experience of social media further as it is quite complex. Nonetheless, I am delighted for the opportunity to hear the voices of the girls who participated and I am glad that I chose to complete primary research.

A learning curve for me was teaching myself how to operate SPSS. This was a system that I had no experience of using before, and I quickly learned that technology doesn't come as easily to me as I had hoped. Nonetheless, I persevered and was adamant to figure it out. YouTube tutorials and *SPSS for Dummies* became my best friend. I eventually became more competent in using the system and it produced the descriptive statistics which provided further context that adds to the research. I have learned from completing this research that my own research interests lies more in the area of qualitative research as opposed to quantitative.

Overall, the experience of completing this dissertation was very beneficial to my learning as a researcher. I am completing this reflective piece feeling confident that I gave it my best effort and equally hope that it is a useful study which may support The Shona Project in their work. I am grateful for this opportunity through the CARL initiative. I am optimistic about the prospect of continuing my role as a researcher in future as a result of this experience.

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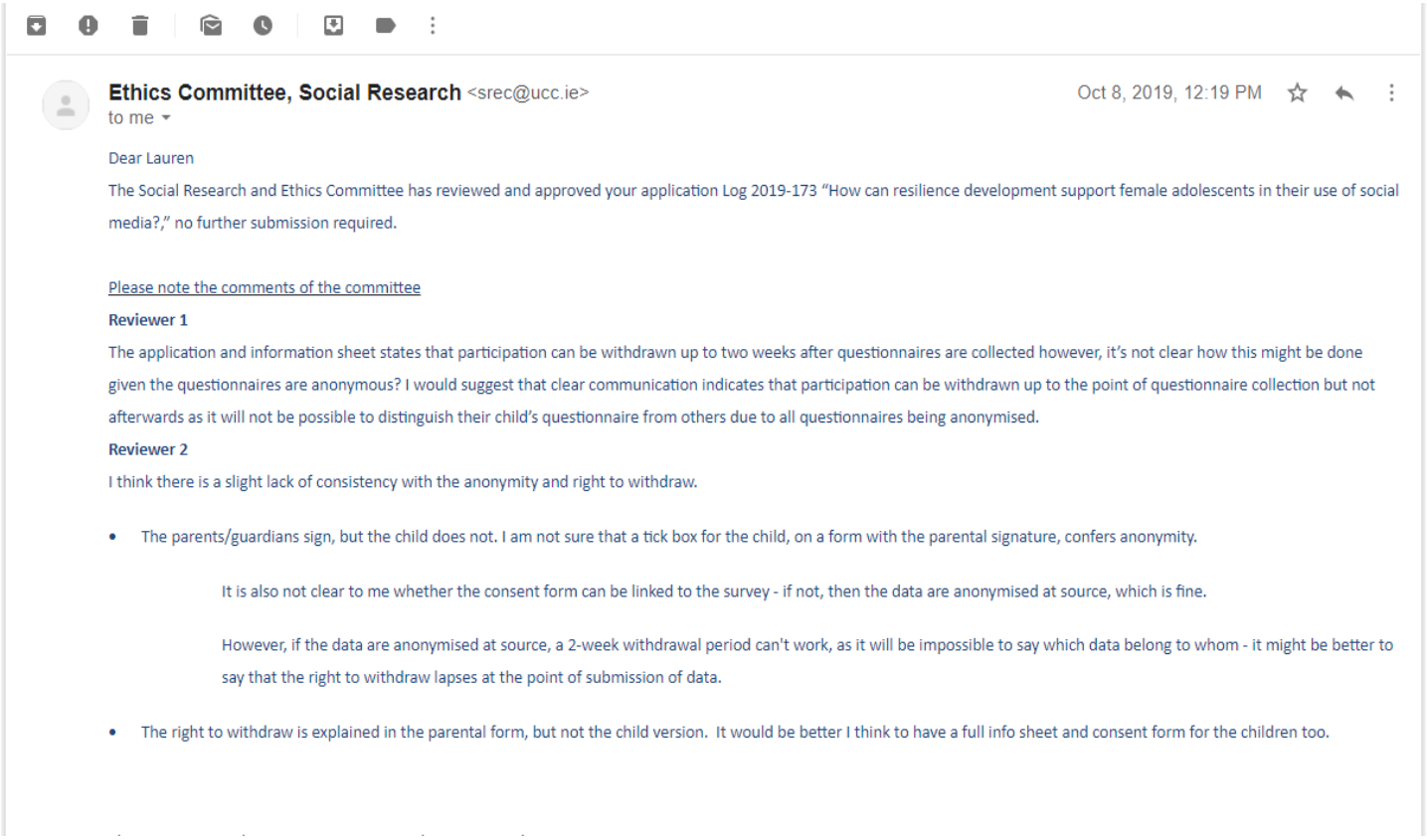
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Confirmation of Ethical Approval from University College Cork's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC).



Ethics Committee, Social Research <srec@ucc.ie> Oct 8, 2019, 12:19 PM

to me

Dear Lauren

The Social Research and Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved your application Log 2019-173 "How can resilience development support female adolescents in their use of social media?," no further submission required.

Please note the comments of the committee

Reviewer 1

The application and information sheet states that participation can be withdrawn up to two weeks after questionnaires are collected however, it's not clear how this might be done given the questionnaires are anonymous? I would suggest that clear communication indicates that participation can be withdrawn up to the point of questionnaire collection but not afterwards as it will not be possible to distinguish their child's questionnaire from others due to all questionnaires being anonymised.

Reviewer 2

I think there is a slight lack of consistency with the anonymity and right to withdraw.

- The parents/guardians sign, but the child does not. I am not sure that a tick box for the child, on a form with the parental signature, confers anonymity.

  It is also not clear to me whether the consent form can be linked to the survey - if not, then the data are anonymised at source, which is fine.

  However, if the data are anonymised at source, a 2-week withdrawal period can't work, as it will be impossible to say which data belong to whom - it might be better to say that the right to withdraw lapses at the point of submission of data.

- The right to withdraw is explained in the parental form, but not the child version. It would be better I think to have a full info sheet and consent form for the children too.

Appendix 2: Research Information Sheet with attached Consent and Assent Sheets.



Information Sheet

Thank you for considering allowing your child to participate in this research project. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the study is about and what your child's participation would involve, to enable you to make an informed choice.

My name is Lauren Flynn and I am a final year Master of Social Work student in University College Cork (UCC). For my final year dissertation I am conducting research on behalf of The Shona Project (https://www.shona.ie/). The purpose of this study is to gather a snapshot of teenage girls' social media habits and how these habits affect them. Should you choose to participate, your child will be asked to complete the attached survey, which includes questions about social media use and its potential effects.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation for your child to participate, and should they choose to do so they can refuse to answer specific questions or decide to withdraw from the study up. All information your child provides will be confidential and anonymity will be protected throughout the study.

Your child will maintain the right to withdraw from the study until the survey is collected. At this point your child's data will be collated with that of other participants and can no longer be retracted.

The anonymous data will be scanned and stored on the University College Cork Google Drive system and subsequently on the UCC server. The data will be stored for ten years as required by the University Code of Research Conduct. The information your child provides will contribute towards findings for my social work masters' dissertation. On completion of this research, findings, including anonymous data and quotations taken from survey responses will be presented at a postgraduate research conference in UCC. The final dissertation and research report will be available in the University library and online on the CARL website. Findings from this study may be published in academic journals in the future.

We do not anticipate any negative outcomes from participating in this study. Should your child experience any distress arising from participating in the research, the website below contains contact details for various support services which may be of assistance.
https://shona.ie/help-2/

This study has obtained ethical approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries about this research, you can contact me, Lauren Flynn, at 118224163@umail.ucc.ie. My academic supervisor Caroline Shore can also be contacted on c.shore@ucc.ie.

If you agree to your child taking part in this study, please complete the consent form overleaf.



Consent Form (Parent/Guardian)

Do you consent to your child participating in this study?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Signed: (Parent/Guardian)

_____



Assent Form (Student)

I am conducting this research to better understand how teenage girls use social media and how it effects them.

Participation in this research is voluntary; you do not have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with. If you choose to participate in this study, your answers to the questionnaire will be anonymous. You can withdraw from this research until the surveys are collected.

Do you agree to participate in this study?

Yes ☐

No ☐

Appendix 3: Research Questionnaire

Age:

Q1. What social media apps do you use? (Number your 1st, 2nd and 3rd most used app).

Facebook ☐ TikTok ☐

Snapchat ☐ Vine ☐

Instagram ☐ Tumblr ☐

Twitter ☐ Pinterest ☐

I do not use social media apps ☐

Other, please state: _____

Q2. How often do you check your most used social media app?

Once a day or less ☐

A few times a day ☐

Once an hour ☐

A few times an hour ☐

Almost constantly ☐

Q3. Why do you use these social media apps? (Tick✓ all that apply).

To keep in contact with my friends/family ☐ To follow news/gossip and trends ☐

To interact with new people ☐ To organise events ☐

To share pictures ☐ To make me feel better ☐

To like/favourite posts ☐ To pass the time ☐

Other, please state: _____

Q4. What are your main reasons for following someone on social media?

(Number your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd reasons).

Because they are my friends ☐

Because they inspire me ☐

To see what others are doing ☐

Because they make me want to be better ☐

Because I relate to them ☐

Other, please state:

1

Q5. Do you think social media affects how you feel or changes your mood while you are using it?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q6. When I use social media, I feel...

(Number your 1st, 2nd and 3rd most frequent feelings).

Happy	☐	Anxious	☐	
Jealous	☐	Popular	☐	
Motivated	☐	Confident	☐	
Low mood	☐	Fear of missing out	☐	
Included	☐			

Other, please state: _____

Q7. I feel upset if I do not get enough likes on my posts on social media.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q8. I compare myself with my friends on social media.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Anything you wish adults knew about social media? Comments welcome here!

thank you ☺