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Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being in Older Adults

Thesis presented

by

Aoife O' Carroll

for the degree of

Doctor of Clinical Psychology

Study 1: Active and Passive Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being in Older Adults: A Systematic Review

Study 2: Older Adults' Experiences of Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being: A Mixed-Methods Study

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2026

Declaration

"This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism."

Overall Abstract

Older adulthood is often accompanied by life changes such as retirement, bereavement, and declines in health or mobility, which may increase the risk of social isolation and reduced psychological wellbeing (PWB). Social networking sites (SNSs) have the potential to support social connectedness in later life, yet evidence regarding their association with PWB remains mixed. This thesis presents two studies examining how different patterns of SNS engagement relate to PWB in older adults, taking into account individual and social factors.

Study 1 comprised a search of five databases (PsychInfo, Web of Science, Medline, International Bibliography of Social Sciences and EBSCO Psychology Databases) to identify studies examining active or passive SNS use and PWB in middle-aged and older adults. The review revealed mixed findings, with both positive and negative associations reported across studies. The association of SNS use on PWB appeared to vary according to cultural, demographic, and contextual factors suggesting that SNS engagement does not have uniform consequences in later life. The evidence base was dominated by cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference regarding the relationship between SNS use and PWB.

Study 2 employed a mixed-methods design to examine SNS use and PWB in a sample of older adults. Survey data from 101 participants assessed SNS use, perceived social support, shyness, and psychological wellbeing while in-depth interviews with 11 participants explored lived experiences of SNS engagement. Quantitative data were analysed using hierarchical multiple regression, and qualitative data using reflexive thematic analysis. Quantitative analyses showed that SNS use did not directly predict wellbeing; however, both close-tie and weak-tie SNS use were indirectly associated with PWB through perceived social support. Shyness moderated the association between weak-tie SNS use and wellbeing, with higher shyness linked to poorer PWB outcomes. Qualitative findings provided contextual

insight into these patterns, illustrating how older adults used SNSs to maintain close relationships, exchange emotional support, engage with shared interests, and reflect nostalgically, while also selectively managing exposure to negative online experiences.

Together, these studies suggest that SNS is associated with PWB in later life but this may be linked to the quality of online interactions, the social support they facilitate, and individual differences such as shyness. Older adults appear to engage with SNSs in purposeful and emotionally selective ways, using them to complement rather than replace offline social relationships. Addressing barriers such as low digital confidence and negative online experiences may help maximise the potential PWB benefits of SNS engagement in older adulthood.

Contents

Declaration **2**

Acknowledgements **3**

Overall Abstract **4**

Table of Contents ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

List of Tables **8**

List of Figures **8**

List of Appendices **9**

Chapter 1: Literature Review **10**

Introduction **10**

1.2 COVID 19 Lockdown and its Effects on Older Adults 13

1.3 Social networking sites (SNS) usage and PWB in older adults 15

1.4 Qualitative research on older adults' SNS use 18

1.5 Socioemotional Selectivity Theory and types of SNS use among older adults 19

1.6 Older adults' evaluative orientations toward SNS use 24

1.7 Contextual influences on SNS engagement among older adults 26

1.8 Relevance to Clinical Psychology 27

1.9 Thesis outline 29

1.10 References 30

Chapter 2: Active and Passive Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being in Middle-Aged and Older Adults: A Systematic Review. **41**

2.1 Abstract **41**

2.2 Introduction **42**

Active and passive SNS usage, Aging and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory 45

Overview of recent research 47

2.3 Methods **51**

2.4 Results ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

2.5 Discussion **72**

2.6 References **78**

Chapter 4: Systematic Review Supplementary Methodology **86**

3.1 Defining the review question and conducting a literature search 86

3.2 Developing a detailed protocol ethical approval 87

3.3 Search strategy 87
3.4 Screening studies against pre-defined eligibility criteria 88
3.5 Quality assessment 89
3.6 Data extraction 90
3.7 References 91
Chapter 4: Older Adults' Experiences of Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being: A Mixed-Methods Study 92
4.1 Abstract 92
4.2 Introduction 94
4.3 Methods 100
4.4 Results 106
4.5 Overall discussion 137
4.6 References 143
Chapter 5: Empirical Paper Supplementary Methodology 152
5.1 Developing the research topic: 152
5.2 Design 153
5.3 Quantitative elements 153
5.4 Qualitative elements 157
5.6 Ethical approval and anticipated ethical concerns 157
5.7 Development of the interview schedule 158
5.8 Participants and recruitment 160
5.9 Data analysis 161
5.10 Reflexive thematic analysis 162
5.11 Reflexivity 166
5.12 References 172
Chapter 6: Integrated Discussion 177
6.3 Implications of findings for clinical practice 182
6.3 Implications of findings for future research 184
6.4 References 187

List of Tables

Table 1: Study Characteristics……..55

Table 2: Effect Sizes…….60

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics……100

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for main variables……...101

Table 5. Pearson Correlations Among SNS Use, PWB Shyness, and PSS……102

Table 6. Independent-samples t-tests examining demographic differences in positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction……...104

Table 7: Hierarchal multiple regression for predicting positive affect……...106

Table 8: Hierarchal multiple regression for predicting life satisfaction……107

Table 9: Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – positive affect……108

Table 10: Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – negative affect….109

Table 11: Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – Life Satisfaction..110

List of Figures

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart…….52

Figure 2: PSS as a Mediator between Close-tie use and Positive Affect……..111

Figure 3: PSS as a Mediator between Close-tie use and Negative Affect……..……112

Figure 4: PSS as a Mediator between Close Tie Use and Life Satisfaction……...113

Figure 5: PSS as a Mediator between Weak Tie Use and Positive Affect……..114

Figure 6: PSS as a Mediator between Weak Tie Use and Negative Affect……115

Figure 7: PSS as a Mediator between Weak Tie Use and Life Satisfaction……...116

Figure 8: Thematic Map…….117

List of Appendices

Appendix A – CASP Quality Appraisal Checklist……182

Appendix B – Ethical approval letter for empirical study……...185

Appendix C – Information Sheet for Quantitative Survey……189

Appendix D – Qualtrics Survey……192

Appendix E – Information Sheet for Qualitative Survey……....213

Appendix F – Author Guidelines for Aging and Mental Health……216

Appendix G – Interview Schedule……..229

Appendix H – Example of coded transcript……230

Appendix I – Example of Audit Trail for Reflexive thematic analysis……...236

Appendix J – Tests of Normality……241

Appendix K – Comparison of parametric and non-parametric tests……242

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

The global population of older adults is larger now than at any point in history, and this demographic expansion is occurring worldwide (United Nations, 2015). As populations age globally understanding the factors that support or undermine psychological wellbeing (PWB) in later life has become an increasingly important public health priority.

PWB can be conceptualised as a multidimensional construct comprising both emotional and evaluative components that together capture an individual's overall sense of life quality (Diener et al., 1985). The affective component reflects the extent to which positive emotions outweigh negative ones, whereas the cognitive component pertains to reflective judgments regarding one's overall life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). These states are influenced by a range of dispositional, social and contextual factors (Diener et al., 1999). In the context of ageing, PWB constitutes a central dimension of successful ageing, associated with enhanced resilience and sustained social engagement (Steptoe et al., 2015).

PWB in older adulthood is shaped by a combination of social and contextual factors that evolve with age. As individuals transition into later life, they often face major life changes such as retirement, bereavement, reduced social networks and changes in physical functioning, all of which can influence PWB (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). These changes and losses can challenge PWB by increasing stress and reducing access to social roles and daily activities that once provided meaning and structure (Steptoe et al., 2015).

Research has shown that these losses can lead to loneliness which is a significant risk factor for poorer mental health outcomes in older adults. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Sulandari et al. (2024) found that loneliness is a significant risk factor for poorer mental health and well-being outcomes in older adults aged 65 years and over. Synthesising data from 78 observational studies involving over 164,000 participants

worldwide, the authors examined the associations between loneliness, depression, anxiety, and life satisfaction. The meta-analysis demonstrated that loneliness was strongly associated with lower life satisfaction, with older adults who reported lower levels of loneliness being more than three times as likely to report higher life satisfaction compared with those experiencing greater loneliness. This effect was comparable in magnitude to associations observed for physical capability and social support, underscoring loneliness as a key psychosocial determinant of mental well-being in later life (Sulandari et al., 2024).

Importantly, loneliness was also closely intertwined with mental health outcomes. Higher loneliness was associated with increased depressive and anxiety symptoms, which themselves showed the strongest associations with reduced life satisfaction across all variables examined. Moderator analyses further revealed that the association between loneliness and life satisfaction was stronger in samples with a higher proportion of women, indicating potential gender differences in vulnerability to the mental health impacts of loneliness (Sulandari et al., 2024).

Building on this large-scale evidence, research focusing on older adults' subjective evaluations of their social relationships has clarified how loneliness becomes psychologically harmful in later life. Losada et al. (2012) showed that loneliness in older adults is closely linked to subjective dissatisfaction with social relationships, rather than to objective levels of social contact. Their findings indicated that higher loneliness was associated with increased depressive symptoms, somatic complaints, and feelings of alienation. Notably, dissatisfaction with the frequency of contact with relatives and friends emerged as one of the strongest predictors of loneliness. Crucially, this effect was not driven by the actual number of social interactions, but by whether older adults felt that their level of contact matched their personal needs and expectations (Losada et al., 2012).

This distinction highlights the importance of subjective appraisal in shaping loneliness

and psychological wellbeing, complementing the meta-analytic evidence reported by Sulandari et al. (2024) and reinforcing the broader conclusion that perceived social connectedness, rather than structural social contact alone, plays a central role in mental health outcomes in later life.

This emphasis on subjective appraisal underscores the importance of identifying the sociodemographic and behavioural factors that place some older adults at greater risk of loneliness in later life. Research has identified several sociodemographic and behavioural factors that contribute to loneliness in later life. Women, individuals with poorer-quality social relationships, those who have infrequent contact with friends and neighbours, people with lower socioeconomic status, and those with reduced activity levels are all more likely to report feeling lonely (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). Loneliness tends to increase among the "oldest-old" (aged 80 years and over), a pattern attributed to greater social isolation following bereavement and reduced opportunities to offset time spent alone due to declining functional abilities (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2003). These factors collectively heighten vulnerability to loneliness in advanced age.

Nevertheless many older adults demonstrate strong emotional resilience, drawing on accumulated life experience, emotion regulation skills, and selective investment in close relationships to maintain stable well-being despite these transitions (Charles, 2010). Despite increased exposure to stressors such as chronic illness, bereavement, and functional decline, many older adults maintain stable levels of emotional wellbeing, a phenomenon known as the "paradox of ageing" (Mather, 2012). Research suggests that older adults often demonstrate greater emotional resilience than younger adults, partly due to enhanced emotion regulation skills and a stronger orientation toward meaning-focused coping (Charles, 2010; Ong et al., 2006). For example, older adults are more likely to use adaptive strategies such as positive reappraisal, acceptance and selective investment in emotionally meaningful relationships, all

of which buffer against psychological distress (Carstensen et al., 2011). Resilience in later life is also supported by social factors: strong perceived social support, continued engagement in valued social roles, and a sense of purpose have been shown to protect older adults from the negative effects of loneliness and stress (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2012). Due to the importance of these social factors it is important to consider the effect on older adults' wellbeing when social connection is constrained.

1.2 COVID 19 Lockdown and its Effects on Older Adults

Although COVID-19 posed substantial risks to older adults' physical health, research revealed a more nuanced picture of its psychological impact. Several studies found that older adults demonstrated lower stress, greater emotional stability, and higher overall wellbeing compared to younger cohorts during the pandemic (Birditt et al., 2021; Carstensen et al., 2020; Ebert et al., 2020; Jiang, 2020). Older adults reported fewer pandemic-related stressors and more positive relationship quality (Birditt et al., 2021), exhibited greater emotional stability and wellbeing than younger groups (Carstensen et al., 2020), and experienced higher positive affect and lower negative affect (Ebert et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with lifespan theories suggesting that accumulated life experience and refined emotion-regulation strategies (e.g., selective optimisation, positivity focus) may buffer older adults against crisis-related distress (Carstensen et al., 2011; Charles, 2010;). However, this apparent emotional resilience does not imply that older adults were unaffected by the prolonged social disruptions introduced by the pandemic, particularly in relation to social wellbeing.

Despite evidence of emotional resilience, the prolonged social restrictions introduced during the pandemic posed significant challenges to older adults' social wellbeing, a core component of psychological health. Evidence accumulated during the pandemic indicates that disruptions to social routines had a measurable negative impact on older adults' wellbeing.

Reduced contact with family and friends alongside increased isolation contributed to heightened stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Birditt et al., 2021; 2021; Fingerman et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2021; Kredel & Perry, 2021). Although some older adults reported minimal concern about reduced social interaction early in the pandemic, possibly due to adaptive coping strategies or assumptions that restrictions would be temporary, wellbeing declined as distancing measures persisted (Hansen et al., 2021).

Qualitative research provides further insight into how these disruptions to social routines were experienced in everyday life. A study of 1,272 adults aged 64 and older found that maintaining social relationships emerged as the most significant challenge during periods of physical distancing (Heid et al., 2021.) Participants described substantial emotional strain due to the loss of everyday social contact, cancellations of social gatherings, and restricted ability to participate in valued roles (Heid et al., 2021). Large-scale cross-national evidence likewise demonstrated that social isolation resulting from distancing practices was strongly associated with increased psychological distress in older adults (Kim & Jung, 2020). Seifert et al. (2021) found that older adults not only experienced social exclusion due to physical distancing mandates but many also faced digital exclusion, meaning they were unable to use digital tools that might have mitigated isolation. The study emphasises that a substantial portion of older adults, especially those who are frail, living in long-term care facilities or lacking access to devices or digital skills were unable to participate in online social activities (Seifert et al., 2021).

Understanding and addressing such forms of social exclusion is critical, given extensive evidence that meaningful social relationships and opportunities for social engagement are strongly linked to better mental health and life satisfaction in later life (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Social wellbeing can be understood as the ability to communicate effectively, maintain close relationships, and sustain a supportive social network that buffers

against distress (Davis & Davies, 2025). These components map closely onto constructs widely examined in gerontology, such as social connectedness, isolation, and support. Given the centrality of social wellbeing to psychological health, disruptions to social connection whether due to reduced mobility, geographical distance, or global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, represent a critical risk factor in later life. Because social connections are so important to wellbeing and because traditional ways of making and sustaining social connections can be disrupted it is important to consider how technology can be used to support alternative forms of social connection.

1.3 Social networking sites (SNS) usage and PWB in older adults

Social networking sites (SNS) have become an increasingly prominent means of social interaction, offering users opportunities to communicate, share information, and maintain relationships through digital platforms. Defined as web-based services that enable individuals to construct profiles, articulate social connections, and interact within networked systems (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), SNS provide a distinct form of social engagement that differs from traditional face-to-face or telephone communication. While initially adopted primarily by younger cohorts, SNS use among older adults has grown steadily over the past decade, driven in part by greater internet accessibility and the perceived benefits of maintaining social contact across geographical distance (Friemel, 2016). However, unlike younger users, many older adults are not digital natives and did not encounter SNS during earlier stages of the life course. As a result, their engagement with these technologies often occurs later in life and is shaped by different motivations and competencies (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017).

Younger people make up the largest cohort of SNS use and as such most of the research conducted has been focussed on adolescent samples or young adults (Erfani & Abedin, 2018). Although research on SNS use and PWB among older adults has increased in

recent years, the evidence base remains comparatively limited. Lei et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review synthesising 64 studies examining the associations between SNS use and psychosocial outcomes in adults aged 65 years and older. The evidence base was dominated by cross-sectional designs and findings were inconsistent, appearing highly contingent on how both SNS use and psychosocial outcomes were operationalised.

Twenty-two studies examined depression as an outcome, the majority of which were cross-sectional. Across these studies, greater SNS use was generally associated with fewer depressive symptoms, a pattern that was also observed in several intervention studies. However, evidence from the four longitudinal studies was mixed, with two reporting lower depressive symptoms over time and two finding no prospective association between SNS use and depression. Interpretation is further complicated by substantial heterogeneity in the measurement of depression, with studies employing a range of instruments (e.g., CES-D, GDS, PHQ), likely contributing to variability in findings (Lei et al., 2024)

Loneliness was examined in 26 studies, again predominantly cross-sectional. Overall, cross-sectional evidence tended to suggest that greater SNS use was associated with lower loneliness. In contrast, longitudinal and intervention findings were inconsistent. Of the two longitudinal studies, Szabo et al. (2019) found that frequent SNS use predicted lower loneliness over time, whereas Schwaba et al. (2021) reported no association. Intervention studies similarly produced mixed results.

Seventeen studies investigated life satisfaction, with most reporting positive associations between greater SNS use and life satisfaction in cross-sectional analyses. However, the sole longitudinal study found no improvement in life satisfaction over time (Schwaba et al., 2021). For intervention studies, Morton et al. (2018) reported improvements in life satisfaction that appeared to operate indirectly through increased feelings of competence.

Research examining anxiety was sparse, with only four studies included in the review. Cross-sectional findings were largely null, while one intervention study reported reductions in anxiety that were mediated by increased competence following SNS use training (Morton et al., 2018). Evidence for social connectedness or relatedness was similarly limited and inconsistent, with only one of four studies (Clarke & Moloney, 2020) reporting higher relatedness among more frequent SNS users.

Across outcomes, perceived social support emerged as the most consistent mediating mechanism. Lei et al. report that the majority of mediation studies (9 of 11) identified social support or social contact as accounting for associations between SNS use and outcomes including loneliness, depression, quality of life, and life satisfaction (Lei et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, the literature is characterised by several persistent limitations that constrain interpretation. The predominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference and increases the likelihood of selection effects, whereby healthier and more socially connected individuals may be more inclined or able to engage with SNSs. Considerable heterogeneity in outcome measures and SNS operationalisations further undermines comparability across studies, with SNS use variously defined as user status, frequency or time spent online (Lei et al., 2024).

Greater use of in-depth qualitative approaches could help address these limitations by elucidating the meanings older adults attach to SNS engagement and the mechanisms through which SNS use interacts with offline resources such as social support, health status, and digital competence. Such work would be valuable in clarifying inconsistent quantitative findings and identifying the conditions under which SNS use may be supportive or detrimental to psychological well-being.

1.4 Qualitative research on older adults' SNS use

A growing body of qualitative research has explored how older adults understand and experience social networking sites (SNSs), revealing a consistent tension between the potential social benefits and downsides of these platforms. Ballantyne et al. (2010) examined older adults' experiences using an age-targeted social networking website and found reductions in temporal loneliness (short-term loneliness arising from situational changes) especially during evenings when feelings of isolation were strongest. Participants valued the ability to access companionship on demand, describing SNS use as a form of distraction and emotional support (Ballantyne et al., 2010). Matilainen et al. (2017) similarly reported that aged-care residents enjoyed learning how to use Facebook, appreciated reconnecting with distant family and viewed the platform as potentially beneficial for maintaining social ties as mobility declined. However, limited training and the withdrawal of computer access (due to renovations of participants computer lab) prevented sustained use, leading the authors to conclude that environmental and organisational supports are crucial for SNS interventions in residential care settings (Matilainen et al., 2017).

Research has also highlighted that intergenerational connection is a core motivator with Erickson (2011) demonstrating that Facebook increased older adults' awareness of family members' everyday lives, which enhanced bonding without requiring extensive self-disclosure. Although participants seldom used SNSs to form new relationships or expand their networks they valued the ability to stay informed, particularly through photos and small updates, which often prompted offline conversations and strengthened existing ties (Erickson 2011).

Despite these recognised benefits qualitative findings consistently point to downsides of SNS use. Hope et al. (2014) found that even technologically capable older adults preferred 'material' communication (e.g., letters, printed photos) over digital forms, perceiving these as

more meaningful and better aligned with their communication values. Participants saw social media content as trivial or overwhelming and expressed concerns about privacy and credibility (Hope et al., 2014).

One study further identified that older adults often lack the conceptual knowledge needed to understand how SNSs work (Quinn et al., 2016). Participants struggled with terminology and the logic of newsfeeds or notifications which led to feelings of confusion and turn led to diminished use. Authors pointed out that conceptual learning (understanding underlying principles) is essential for engagement and have the positive side effect of imparting cognitive benefits.

Across these studies older adults generally view SNSs as useful primarily for maintaining existing close relationships rather than for expanding their networks. Engagement is made more accessible through personalised training, accessible devices, and clear demonstration of social benefits. Conversely, adoption is hindered by usability challenges, conceptual confusion, privacy concerns and a perception that SNS communication is less meaningful than traditional media. Collectively, these qualitative findings underscore that older adults' SNS use is shaped not only by technological affordances but by broader social and environmental contexts.

1.5 Socioemotional Selectivity Theory and types of SNS use among older adults

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) is a lifespan theory of motivation developed by Carstensen to explain age-related changes in social goals and preferences. The theory emphasises the role of perceived time horizons in shaping individuals' prioritisation of social relationships and emotional experiences across adulthood (Carstensen, 1992).

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) proposes that social motivations shift across the lifespan as individuals' perceptions of time change (Carstensen, 1992). With increasing

age people become more inclined to invest their limited time and energy in emotionally meaningful goals, activities and relationships, with the aim of maximizing positive emotional experience and minimising negative affect. These motivational changes shape the way individuals maintain their social networks, including how they use communication technologies to remain connected. In line with SST, individuals organise their social circles in ways that support their age-related social goals and enhance their wellbeing (Carstensen, 1992).

In adolescence and young adulthood, individuals tend to perceive their future as relatively expansive (Carstensen, 1995). This open time horizon allows them to prioritise goals focused on future growth, such as acquiring new knowledge and forming new relationships that may yield long-term benefits. As a result, younger adults often maintain larger and more diverse social networks that include many peripheral or less intimate ties. These broader networks can facilitate exploration and the accumulation of social and professional resources (Carstensen, 1995).

In contrast, older adults typically place greater emphasis on the emotional quality rather than the size of their social networks (Carstensen, 1995). As people move into later life, they become more aware of the finitude of time. This heightened sense of time limitation prompts a reorientation toward present-focused goals that prioritise emotional meaning and relational closeness. Older adults are therefore more likely to selectively retain close, emotionally supportive relationships and to let go of more distant relationships. Their goals increasingly centre on fostering a sense of belonging and sustaining meaningful connections that contribute to a fulfilling life narrative (Carstensen, 1995). Consistent with this, older adults are often more content with smaller, close-knit networks and show relatively little desire to expand these networks by adding new friends (Lansford et al., 1998).

Previous research has found that SNS use in older adults reflects their prioritisation of

emotionally meaningful interactions over expansive social exploration. In comparison to younger adults, older adults tend to have smaller Facebook friend networks that comprise a higher proportion of actual friends (Chang et al., 2015). Research investigating SNS engagement among adolescents and young adults indicates that active forms of use such as creating content and communicating online are associated with enhanced social wellbeing (Verduyn et al., 2017). In contrast, passive consumption of content and using SNSs primarily to establish new connections have been linked to lower levels of social wellbeing (Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Yang & Brown, 2013).

Among adults aged 50 and over, Hutto et al. (2015) reported that engaging in directed communication on social networking sites such as sending messages or interacting directly with others was linked to higher social satisfaction, whereas more passive forms of SNS use were not associated with the same benefit (Hutto et al., 2015). Sum et al (2008) found that among adults aged 55 and older, using the internet primarily for interpersonal communication rather than for information seeking or commercial activities was linked to reduced feelings of loneliness. Taking into account this previous research and being mindful of the tenets of SST, defining specific types of SNS use is essential when examining the relationship between SNS engagement and PWB in later life, as SST highlights that the motives underlying social interaction determine its emotional outcomes. Differentiating between active, emotionally driven engagement with close-ties and passive or instrumental use allows researchers to better understand how SNS behaviours align with older adults' goal of maximising meaningful social connection and enhancing wellbeing.

1.6 Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Rationale

Alongside SST a number of other complementary theoretical perspectives inform the current research and guide the selection of variables examined. Psychological wellbeing is

conceptualised using the subjective wellbeing framework (Diener, 1984), encompassing positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction. The Social Cure framework highlights the role of social relationships and group-based resources in promoting mental health and wellbeing by emphasising the importance of group memberships and social identities as sources of psychological resources, including a sense of belonging, meaning, and collective support (Jetten et al., 2017). From this perspective, engagement in social networks, including those facilitated by SNSs, may contribute to wellbeing not only through individual relationships but also through connection to broader social groups and communities.

To account for the structure and quality of social relationships, the thesis also draws on Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973), which distinguishes between strong and weak ties, and Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000), which emphasises the value of social connections as resources that can support wellbeing. Social Network Theory proposes that strong ties, such as close friends and family, are characterised by emotional closeness, frequent interaction, and high levels of trust, making them particularly important sources of emotional and instrumental support. In contrast, weak ties, such as acquaintances, are typically less emotionally intense but provide access to novel information and broader social opportunities. This distinction is especially relevant in the context of social networking sites (SNSs), which facilitate both the maintenance of close relationships and the expansion of wider, more diffuse networks.

Complementing this, Social Capital Theory conceptualises social relationships as resources that can be mobilised to achieve beneficial outcomes, including psychological wellbeing. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding social capital, which arises from strong ties and supports emotional closeness and reciprocity, and bridging social capital, which is derived from weak ties and provides access to diverse perspectives and information. Within SNS contexts, these forms of social capital may be differentially associated with

wellbeing outcomes, with bonding capital supporting emotional wellbeing and bridging capital contributing to broader social connectedness. Together, these frameworks provide a useful lens for understanding how both the structure of social networks and the resources embedded within them may influence psychological wellbeing in older adults.

Patterns of SNS engagement are further informed by Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Ruggiero, 2000), which posits that individuals actively select media behaviours to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, providing a conceptual basis for distinguishing between active and passive SNS use. Additionally, Belongingness Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) underscores the fundamental human need to form and maintain interpersonal bonds, offering a rationale for why SNS engagement may influence wellbeing outcomes.

Individual differences in SNS use are considered through the inclusion of shyness, which can be understood within the Social Compensation Hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; 2009). This perspective suggests that individuals who experience difficulties in offline social interaction, such as those higher in shyness, may derive greater benefit from online environments that afford increased control over self-presentation and reduced social risk. This is further supported by the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004), which proposes that reduced social cues and perceived anonymity in online contexts can lower interpersonal inhibition and facilitate communication. Shyness has been conceptualised as a form of social inhibition characterised by discomfort and reticence in interpersonal interactions (Cheek & Buss, 1981), and has been associated with reduced social participation and lower perceived social support in offline contexts. Taken together, these frameworks provide a coherent theoretical basis for examining how patterns of SNS use, social resources, and individual differences such as shyness interact to influence psychological wellbeing in older adulthood.

1.7 Older adults' evaluative orientations toward SNS use

Older adults' engagement with SNSs is shaped by a range of evaluations that play a central role in decisions about whether and to what extent these technologies are used. Importantly, choosing not to engage with SNS should not be interpreted as a failure to adapt or a deficit in digital competence, but rather as a rational decision grounded in communication preferences and assessments of relevance. This thesis does not assume that greater SNS adoption among older adults is inherently desirable, rather it recognises that SNS use represents one of many possible avenues for social connection.

Concerns about privacy, data security, and loss of control are commonly reported and are particularly salient for older adults who feel uncertain about how personal information is stored, shared or monetised online. These reservations are often reinforced by a perceived mismatch between older adults' preferred communication styles, typically embedded in established relationships and the informal and highly public norms of many SNS environments (Lehtinen et al., 2009). Practices such as publicly sharing achievements or broadcasting personal opinions may be experienced as unnecessarily self-promotional or superficial, and misaligned with expectations of appropriate social behaviour (Lehtinen et al., 2009). As a result, some older adults view SNS participation as requiring forms of self-presentation that feel inauthentic or socially uncomfortable. Importantly, such evaluations reflect normative preferences about meaningful communication.

Perceived relevance also plays a critical role in shaping attitudes toward SNS use. Xie et al. (2012) observed that many older adults struggle to see how social media fits into their daily routines or supports their interests, particularly when platforms appear youth-oriented or entertainment-focused. When SNS use is not clearly connected to meaningful goals such as maintaining family relationships or engaging in valued hobbies, disinterest or scepticism may

represent a rational assessment that these platforms offer limited personal value (Xie et al., 2012). Similarly, perceptions of limited control over platform features or privacy settings can contribute to frustration or anxiety, particularly during initial encounters with SNS technologies (Charness & Boot, 2009). Concerns about scams, misinformation, or untrustworthy contacts further shape cautious or selective engagement (Pfeil et al., 2009).

Research also highlights circumstances under which older adults view SNSs more positively and choose to engage with them. Some report enjoyment, entertainment, and cognitive stimulation from online content, positioning SNS use as a leisure activity rather than a social necessity (Nimrod, 2010). Xie et al. (2012) further demonstrate that attitudes toward SNS use can shift when older adults receive supportive, personalised instruction that links technology use to personally meaningful goals. Under these conditions, SNSs may be evaluated as useful, manageable and socially beneficial, rather than overwhelming or intrusive (Xie et al., 2012).

Consistent with this perspective, Norval (2012) identifies connection with family, particularly geographically distant children and grandchildren, as a key motivator for SNS use among older adults, alongside access to information and community engagement during significant. These factors may tie in with SST. SNSs may also provide emotional support during life transitions such as retirement or bereavement (Norval, 2012). However, Norval's findings equally suggest that motivation increases when SNSs are perceived as purposeful and congruent with older adults' communication preferences. Taken together, this body of work underscores that SNS use represents one potential avenue for social connection in later life but that choosing not to engage can be a valid and meaningful decision rooted in preferences and assessments of benefit.

1.8 Contextual influences on SNS engagement among older adults

Despite availability of social networking sites, older adults' engagement with these platforms is shaped by a range of technological, individual, and structural considerations that influence both willingness and opportunity to participate.

One frequently cited consideration concerns perceived ease of use. Many older adults report difficulties navigating interfaces, understanding platform functions or managing updates and notifications (Lehtinen et al., 2009). Braun (2013) found that while ease of use strongly predicts technology adoption in many groups, perceived usefulness and trust were more salient predictors of SNS intention among older adults. In this study, perceived usefulness and trust, not perceived ease of use predicted intention to use SNS, suggesting that usability issues may discourage adoption long before individuals attempt to learn the platform (Braun, 2013). A review of 28 papers on older adults SNS usage behaviours, antecedents and associated outcomes similarly highlight technical complexity and non-intuitive design as common considerations, particularly when platforms are not perceived as being designed with older users in mind (Chew et al., 2022).

Concerns related to trust, privacy, and online safety also play a central role in shaping SNS engagement. Older adults frequently express concerns about data protection, surveillance, and the visibility of personal information, leading some to limit or avoid participation in SNS communication (Braun, 2013). Such concerns are reinforced by awareness of scam-related activity, unwanted contact, and identity misuse, which disproportionately affect older adults and can make cautious disengagement a protective strategy (Chew et al., 2022). From this perspective, selective non-use may function as a means of maintaining autonomy and personal security in digital environments perceived as unpredictable or risky.

Perceived usefulness and personal relevance further influence decisions about SNS

engagement. Older adults who do not view SNS as meaningfully enhancing their daily lives, or who feel that existing communication methods such as phone calls or email adequately meet their social needs, may choose not to adopt additional platforms. This was described as a motivational divide, whereby SNS content or interaction styles are not universally experienced as compelling or valuable, particularly when family members or close friends are not active users themselves (Chew et al., 2022).

Finally, structural inequalities associated with the digital divide continue to shape opportunities for SNS engagement. Yu et al. (2016) demonstrate systematic disparities in internet access and SNS adoption among older adults, with lower-income, less-educated, and physically disadvantaged individuals significantly less likely to engage. These inequalities often widen with age, reflecting differences in access to devices, cognitive and physical resources, and opportunities for digital learning.

Together this literature indicates that older adults' SNS engagement is best understood as the outcome of complex, context-dependent evaluations rather than a simple matter of adoption or non-adoption. SNS use represents a choice that older adults make based on personal priorities and circumstances; however, addressing structural and design-related issues may make participation more accessible for those who are interested in engaging.

1.9 Relevance to Clinical Psychology

Clinical psychologists are evidence-based practitioners who apply psychological theory and research to support individuals in preventing and addressing mental health difficulties while promoting overall wellbeing across the lifespan. The present research is relevant to clinical psychology insofar as it examines two constructs central to work with older adults: social connection and emotion regulation, within a social context that is increasingly shaped by digital technologies.

Irish mental health policy emphasises scalable, community-embedded approaches that address social determinants of mental health and support wellbeing in later life. *Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone* (Department of Health, 2020) frames services as lifespan-oriented and prevention-focused, highlighting the importance of social inclusion and integrated community supports. Research that clarifies which patterns of SNS engagement are associated with reduced loneliness and enhanced wellbeing can provide clinicians with evidence to inform collaborative formulation and discussion, helping to consider when and how digital social interaction may be relevant for particular individuals.

This perspective aligns with the Psychological Society of Ireland's (2019) emphasis on inclusion, participation, and the need to challenge ageist assumptions. By rejecting deficit-based narratives that frame older adults as technologically resistant or in need of correction, this research supports strengths-based clinical formulations that recognise older adults as active evaluators of their social worlds. Clinically, this stance helps counter internalised ageism and validates diverse pathways to connection and wellbeing, including selective use of digital platforms for those that are interested.

Given the range of settings in which clinical psychologists work including primary care, specialist mental health services, and hospital contexts, they are often involved, directly or indirectly, in supporting older adults experiencing distress related to loneliness, loss or social change. The findings of this research may inform assessment and formulation by encouraging clinicians to consider the online social environment as one potential context influencing emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning. Evidence that certain forms of active, emotionally meaningful SNS engagement are associated with wellbeing (Hutto et al., 2015; Leist, 2013) can be used collaboratively, where relevant, to explore whether and how digital communication fits within an individual's existing coping strategies and social preferences.

At a broader level, the findings may also inform the development of community-based psychoeducational initiatives aligned with *Sharing the Vision* (Department of Health, 2020) and the *Healthy Ireland* framework (Department of Health, 2023). Such initiatives could support older adults who express interest in digital communication to reflect on how online interactions affect mood and connection and to develop skills that enhance safety and personal control. By promoting intentional, emotionally fulfilling digital engagement, such an initiative may help some older adults to reduce loneliness and support autonomy and inclusion.

1.10 Thesis outline

This thesis examines the relationship between SNS use and PWB in older adults through two complementary studies, with the overarching aim of understanding how online social engagement influences mental health outcomes in later life. Older adults are at increased risk of social isolation and loneliness, which are strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline (Santini et al., 2020). As communication increasingly occurs online, SNSs may represent an important avenue for sustaining social contact and emotional wellbeing (Nguyen et al., 2022). Study 1 is a systematic review investigating how distinct patterns of SNS use, specifically active forms (direct messaging or posting), versus passive browsing (scrolling, looking at others content) relate to indicators of PWB (positive affect, negative affect and satisfaction with life). Study 2 uses mixed methods to investigate how different patterns of SNS use relate to PWB in older adults, specifically examining the roles of shyness and perceived social connectedness. The primary aim is to determine whether the type of SNS use, particularly maintaining close-ties, maintaining weak-ties, and diversionary use, differentially predicts wellbeing outcomes such as positive affect, negative affect, and life

satisfaction, as conceptualised by Diener et al. (1999). Guided by Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 2006), both studies consider how age-related motivational shifts toward emotionally meaningful goals shape technology use. Integrating the two studies provides a comprehensive understanding of how SNS engagement can either enhance or challenge wellbeing in ageing populations.

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Chapter 2: Active and Passive Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being in Middle-Aged and Older Adults: A Systematic Review.

2.1 Abstract

Background: The relationships between active (posting, direct messaging) and passive (scrolling) social network site (SNS) use and psychological wellbeing (PWB) have been studied but findings have been mixed. No reviews have focussed on middle-aged and older adults. The current systematic review explores outcomes of studies exploring associations between active or passive SNS usage and PWB in adults over 40.

Method: A systematic search of five databases (PsychInfo, Web of Science, Medline, International bibliography of social sciences and EBSCO Psychology databases) was conducted to identify studies examining active or passive SNS use and PWB in middle-aged and older adults. A total of 4,128 of papers were identified for screening.

Results: A total of 11 studies were included. Findings were mixed, with active and passive SNS use showing different associations with measures of PWB across cultural and demographic groups. The evidence base was dominated by cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference regarding the relationship between SNS use and PWB. The review suggests that patterns of SNS engagement may be shaped by cultural and temporal contexts.

Conclusion: Implications for future research are discussed and include the need to clarify and standardise how active and passive social media use are operationalised, to enable more consistent comparisons across studies and a clearer understanding of their association with psychological well-being.

.**Keywords:** Middle-aged, Older Adults, Social Network Use, Active and Passive use, Psychological Wellbeing

2.2 Introduction

By 2050 it is projected that the percentage of older adults among the global population will have nearly doubled from 12-22% (United Nations, 2017). In later life, mental health is influenced not only by current physical and social circumstances but also by the accumulation of experiences across the life course, alongside stressors that are specific to ageing (World Health Organisation, 2017).

Exposure to adversity, declines in intrinsic capacity, and reductions in functional ability can each contribute to psychological vulnerability and emotional distress. Older adulthood is also characterised by an increased likelihood of encountering major life changes, including bereavement, financial adjustment, and shifts in identity or purpose associated with retirement (World Health Organisation, 2017). In addition, despite the substantial social, familial and cultural contributions made by older adults, many experience ageism in both interpersonal and structural forms. Such experiences of marginalisation can undermine self-worth and belonging, with well-documented consequences for mental health and wellbeing. (World Health Organisation, 2017).

Older adults face an increased likelihood of social isolation and loneliness as a result of factors including the loss of friends and family members, age-related mobility limitations and cognitive changes (Coyle & Dugan, 2012). Reduced social connectedness represents a significant risk factor for poorer health and psychological wellbeing in later life (Grenade & Boldy, 2008). Adults aged 65 years and older are particularly vulnerable to social disconnection and loneliness, as age-related factors such as frailty, chronic illness, and functional limitations can restrict opportunities for social engagement (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018).

Beyond individual health constraints, broader societal changes have further intensified

this risk. Shifts in family structures, increased geographic mobility and the dispersal of intergenerational family networks have made it more difficult for older adults to maintain regular and meaningful social contact, thereby increasing vulnerability to social isolation and associated declines in wellbeing (Mellor et al., 2008).

One potential avenue through which older adults may connect socially and reduce the ill-effects of social isolation and loneliness is the use of SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. SNSs are described as Web 2.0 technologies, offering dynamic, user-generated content rather than static webpages. They facilitate the creation of user profiles and support connections between individuals online (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

In the past decade, numbers of internet users across age groups has increased rapidly. Adults aged 50+ in Ireland avail of a high level of access to the internet with varied and frequent use, with 71% having access to the internet in their homes. Of those with access, internet usage among the over 50's varies with 79% using the internet to search for information and 40% using it for SNS (Doody et al., 2020).

A growing body of research suggests that SNS use may support aspects of social connection and psychological wellbeing in later life; however, the evidence base is marked by considerable inconsistency and methodological limitation. A recent scoping review by Chen et al. (2022) reported associations between SNS use and outcomes such as enhanced communication with family and friends, increased perceived independence and self-efficacy, participation in online communities, higher wellbeing and life satisfaction, and reduced depressive symptoms. Supporting this, some longitudinal evidence indicates that internet use may be associated with a reduced likelihood of developing depressive symptoms among older adults (Cotten et al., 2014), while other studies link SNS use with strengthened intergenerational relationships (Berg et al., 2017) and lower reported social isolation (Hajek & König, 2019).

However, these positive associations are not universal. Aarts et al. (2014) found no significant relationships between SNS use and emotional loneliness, social loneliness, or mental health in a community-dwelling sample of older adults, challenging assumptions that online social engagement straightforwardly improves wellbeing. Furthermore, a large population-based study of retired older adults in Shanghai found that those who used social media for six or more hours per day had significantly higher odds of anxiety and depressive symptoms than those with minimal daily use, and individuals meeting criteria for social media addiction showed even stronger associations with both anxiety and depression, indicating potential harm linked to excessive engagement (Huang et al., 2025).

In research on younger populations mobile SNS use predicted more upward comparisons with others' idealised presentations, which in turn was associated with lower self-esteem and reduced well-being over time as users compared themselves unfavourably to peers' curated lives (Schmuck et al., 2019). Meanwhile a review highlights that toxic behaviours on social media such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and harassment are pervasive on social networking platforms and can contribute to stress, negative emotions, and a harmful online environment for users (Walia et al., 2023). Together, these findings suggest that SNS use does not exert a uniform protective effect on mental health in later life underscoring the need to move beyond global measures of SNS use toward more nuanced examinations of how and for whom SNS engagement may be psychologically beneficial.

Given the need to better understand how SNS relates to PWB, research has begun to distinguish between different patterns of SNS use and examine how these patterns are associated with psychological outcomes. A common distinction is between active and passive SNS use. Active SNS use refers to behaviours that involve direct interaction with others, such as posting content, commenting, or sending private messages. Passive SNS use refers to

primarily observing or monitoring others' activity without direct engagement, for example scrolling through feeds or browsing posts (Kross et al., 2021).

Active and passive SNS usage, Aging and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

SNS contain a multitude of functions and enable a wide range of activities, and an increasing body of evidence demonstrates that their association with PWB depends largely on how the technology is used. Research shows that functions involving direct social interaction (e.g., messaging, commenting, responding) are linked to increases in social support and emotional connection (Burke & Kraut, 2016), whereas functions involving passive observation (e.g., scrolling or viewing others' content) are more closely associated with social comparison and reduced wellbeing (Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2017).One framework that helps explain why patterns of SNS use may have different implications across the lifespan is Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1992). SST describes systematic changes in individuals' social goals and behaviours as they age, emphasising that these changes are shaped by people's perceptions of their future time (Carstensen, 1992).

According to SST, younger adults generally perceive time as open-ended and therefore orient their goals toward the future. This future focus leads them to prioritise activities such as acquiring new knowledge, forming new social connections, pursuing career advancement, and building resources that may be beneficial later in life. In contrast, as people age, their perception of time becomes more limited, and this shift brings about a reorientation of goals toward the present. Older adults increasingly prioritise emotionally meaningful goals such as fostering positive emotional states, avoiding negative ones, maintaining social belonging, and deepening intimacy within their existing social circle. This results in a more selective approach to social interaction, where emotionally rewarding relationships are valued over expanding one's network or engaging in pursuits that serve distant future aims

(Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen et al., 1999). Compared to younger individuals, older adults generally have smaller social networks but attach greater importance to the closeness and emotional quality of these ties (Lang & Carstensen, 1994).

This theoretical shift in goals provides an important lens through which to consider different patterns of SNS use. Active SNS use such as posting content, commenting on others' posts, liking or responding to messages, or engaging in private conversations directly facilitates interaction with others. Because these behaviours support ongoing contact with family and friends and allow individuals to maintain emotionally fulfilling relationships, active use can be viewed as closely aligned with SST's emphasis on prioritising meaningful, emotionally rich social experiences in later life. Active SNS use may also support older adults' tendency toward social selectivity, as individuals can engage primarily with those relationships that matter most while disregarding interactions that hold less emotional value (Chang et al., 2015).

In contrast passive SNS use, which involves observing content or browsing through feeds without direct interaction, may not offer the same emotional rewards. Passive use allows individuals to view others' activities but may not promote social connectedness (Roberts et al., 2023). For this reason, passive SNS use may be less consistent with SST's emphasis on present-orientated emotional goals and may not provide older adults with the same psychological benefits that active engagement does. While passive use may be sufficient for younger individuals who are motivated by information gathering or expanding their network, it may be a less effective way for older adults to meet their socioemotional goals.

The principles of SST suggest that older adults may benefit more from active than passive SNS use, as active engagement offers opportunities for emotional closeness, meaningful connection and selective social interaction, all of which are central to older

adults' motivational priorities (Chang et al., 2015). Because older adults typically have smaller but more emotionally significant social networks, the opportunities for meaningful connection afforded by SNS may be particularly important. These considerations provide a strong rationale for examining how active versus passive SNS use differentially relates to PWB in aging adults.

Overview of recent research

There have been a number of reviews carried out in recent years exploring types of SNS use and their differential associations on measures of PWB. A critical scoping review of 40 survey-based studies on adolescents and adults across Europe, Asia, America and Australia was carried out to examine the relationship between active and passive SNS use and well-being or ill-being (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Results found that the evidence supporting the 'active-positive, passive-negative' narrative is weak and inconsistent (Valkenburg et al., 2022). The review highlights the inconsistency in how studies define and measure active and passive use, identifying 36 different operationalisations, underscoring the need for standardised definitions in this area. This scoping review employs a vote-counting method of tallying the number of studies supporting or not supporting specific hypotheses. This approach treats all studies equally, disregarding study quality, oversimplifying complex findings especially where studies report mixed effects. The review does not assess whether studies controlled for confounders, fails to evaluate the rigor of their analytic methods and overlooks age as a potential moderating factor, all of which limit the strength of its conclusions.

A meta-analysis of 141 studies (N =145,394) was carried out to examine the relationship between social media use and mental health, wellbeing and social support outcomes (Godard & Holtzman, 2024). This meta-analysis found that active SNS use shows

small positive associations with wellbeing and online social support, but also a small link to increased anxiety. Passive SNS use has mostly negligible associations with wellbeing, except for small positive links to online social support. Overall, the population-level effects of both active and passive SNS use on wellbeing are minimal (Godard & Holtzman, 2024). Moderator analyses examining user age provides some evidence that for adolescents and emerging adults passive SNS use shows small but consistent negative associations with wellbeing, whereas active use shows no reliable age-specific effects. The negative effects of passive use largely disappear in adult samples, suggesting that younger people are more sensitive to passive browsing (Godard & Holtzman, 2024). The authors speculated that adolescents may be more sensitive to rejection and less able to regulate their emotions and behaviours, while conversely older adults are more likely to benefit from certain aspects of SNS use, citing SST to suggest that older adults value emotionally close relationships, and SNS may help develop and maintain these relationships. Although age was included as a moderator in the analyses, the review did not provide detailed subgroup results specifically for middle-aged and older adults, limiting the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about how active and passive SNS use relate to PWB measures across older age groups (Godard & Holtzman, 2024).

A further two meta-analyses examined types of SNS usage and measures of PWB. Yin et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies to examine the overall association between SNS use and mental health and to identify factors that might moderate this relationship. The authors analysed both positive (e.g., life satisfaction, self-esteem, positive affect) and negative (e.g., depression, anxiety, loneliness) indicators of mental health and found that SNS use showed very small correlations with both positive and negative outcomes. Importantly, several contextual factors moderated these associations: cultural background, measurement of SNS use, and gender. SNS network size was positively associated with

wellbeing, whereas general use correlated with poorer mental health, and passive versus active use did not show significant differential effects. Cultural background also shaped outcomes, with more positive associations observed in collectivist samples. Age did not moderate effects, though the authors note that very few studies included older adults. The authors reported very high heterogeneity (I^2 = 90% for positive indicators; 81% for negative indicators), meaning that effects varied widely across studies due to differences in measurement, cultural context, and sample characteristics (Yin et al., 2019).

Hancock et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale meta-analysis of 226 studies to examine associations between social media use and six domains of PWB, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, and hedonic, eudaimonic, and social wellbeing. Results showed that studies using specific behavioural measures such as posting or messaging (active use) and browsing or viewing content (passive use) produced more variable and differentiated effects than studies relying on global 'time spent' measures. Active behaviours tended to show small positive associations with social wellbeing, whereas passive behaviours were more often linked to small negative associations with depressive or anxiety symptoms. However, these differences were inconsistent and generally small in magnitude, leading the authors to conclude that while the type of engagement may matter, it does not reliably predict wellbeing outcomes across studies. Their moderator analyses again revealed high heterogeneity across effect sizes, with variability driven by factors such as study design, behavioural operationalisation, participant age group, and geographic region (Hancock et al., 2022).

These meta-analyses found differing pooled effect sizes in the associations of active use and passive use with wellbeing, as well as heterogeneity among the pooled effect sizes (Valkenberg et al., 2022). These differing pooled effect sizes may be due to methodological differences in the studies included, for example study designs, populations, interventions, outcome measures in the context of active and passive social media use. Conducting a meta-

analysis under such conditions may obscure meaningful differences and lead to misleading or overly simplified conclusions.

In summation, recent reviews on this topic have methodological limitations which have led to oversimplification of findings and most importantly lack detailed subgroup analyses that focus specifically on middle-aged and older adults. Most studies into the associations between SNS usage and PWB have focussed on emerging adult/undergraduate aged samples who make up the largest group of SNS users around the world (Erfani & Ebedin, 2018). General SNS usage has a different psychological outcome for middle-aged and older adults as opposed to younger users due to difference in size and quality of older adults social networks, with older adults maintaining fewer, but higher quality social connections with close friends and family (Rylands & Van Belle, 2017), while younger adults have a tendency to broadcast to larger networks, which can lead to greater social comparison (Kim & Shen, 2020). Therefore, age-related differences may lead to distinctions in both patterns of SNS use and the psychological outcomes associated with them, making it important to analyse data specifically focused on middle-aged and older adults.

For this reason, a systematic review synthesising empirical evidence on types of SNS usage (active vs passive) and its association with measures of PWB of middle-aged and older adults will be the purpose of the study. In doing so, it aims to highlight gaps in the literature, explore the methodological quality and variability across studies and provide direction for future research and potential intervention strategies in this demographic.

2.3 Methods

The methodology of this review was guided by the PRISMA statement for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009).

Protocol and Registration

The protocol for this systematic review was registered on PROSPERO, an international database of prospectively registered systematic reviews on 14th November 2025 (ID: CRD420251149813).

Research question

What is the relationship between active or passive SNS use and indicators of PWB in middle-aged and older adults?

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review were as follows:

- Employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods designs, including randomised controlled trials and meta-analyses that investigated the association between SNS use and PWB. For the purposes of this review, PWB was operationalised using any of Diener's (1984) components of subjective wellbeing, including life satisfaction, positive affect, or the relative absence of negative affect (e.g., depressive symptoms, anxiety, or stress).
- Reported outcomes that examined whether types of SNS use were associated with PWB in middle-aged or older adults or presented qualitative themes exploring this relationship.

- Assessed SNS behaviours that could be categorised as active (e.g., posting, commenting, sharing) or passive (e.g., browsing, viewing, scrolling).
- Exclusively studied participants aged 40 years and above or carried out subgroup analyse on this age cohort.
- Were published in English.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on general time spent on SNS without examining specific active or passive behaviours.
- Exclusively investigated populations younger than 40 years of age or failed to report results for a 40+ age group.
- Did not report PWB outcomes or qualitative themes related to PWB.
- Were published in languages other than English.
- Were commentaries, editorials, opinion pieces, conference abstracts or reviews without primary data.

Search strategy

Comprehensive pre-planned searches of published studies were conducted in November 2025 using PsycInfo, Web of Science, Medline, International Bibliography of Social Sciences and EBSCO Psychology databases. No restrictions were placed on publication date; therefore, studies published from inception up to the date of the search were considered for inclusion. Search terms are outlined below and were combined using Boolean operators, with truncation and wildcards applied where appropriate. Additional studies were identified through forward and backward citation searches.

Search terms

Full text searches were carried out for active/passive use terms and adult/older adult terms. Title, abstract and keyword searches were carried out for terms relating to SNS usage and PWB:

"Social network*" OR "social network use" OR "social networking site" OR SNS OR "social media" OR "social media use" OR "social platform" OR "online network*" OR "online social network*" OR facebook OR twitter OR Instagram OR snapchat OR whatsapp OR email OR youtube OR reddit OR tiktok OR internet OR online

AND

Active OR passive OR "active use" OR "passive use" OR "active participation" OR "passive participation" OR lurk* OR "passive and active facebook use measure" OR "passive and active use measure" OR PAUM OR "multidimensional scale of facebook use" OR MSFU OR "facebook activity measure" OR "active social network* use" OR "active SNS use" OR "active social media use" OR "active online network use" OR "active facebook use" OR "active twitter use" OR "active Instagram use" OR "active snapchat use" OR "active whatsapp use" OR "active youtube use" OR "active reddit use" OR "active tiktok use" OR "active internet use" OR "passive social network* use" OR "passive social media use" OR "passive online network use" OR "passive SNS use" OR "passive facebook use" OR "passive twitter use" OR "passive Instagram use" OR "passive snapchat use" OR "passive whatsapp use" OR "passive youtube use" OR "passive reddit use" OR "passive tiktok use" OR "passive internet use"

AND

"PWB" OR "Psychological well-being" OR "mental health" OR "wellness" OR "Psychological health" OR "Loneliness" OR "Emotional well-being" OR "emotional wellbeing" OR "quality of life" OR "satisfaction with life" OR "Psychological distress"

AND

Adult* OR “middle-aged” OR “middle-aged” OR “over 40” or “40+” OR “Older adult” OR “Old People” OR “Old age” OR “Older age” OR “Older adulthood” OR Ageing OR Elderl* OR Senior* OR “Senior citizens”

Data Screening

The search results were stored and managed using Rayyan, a web-based systematic review tool that facilitates the screening and organisation of references. Duplicates were removed from the list of papers, and the remaining abstracts were screened by AOC to eliminate any studies which did not meet the inclusion criteria. MM and GM blindly screened 5% of abstracts each to validate the accuracy of AOC’s screening decisions. Interrater reliability was assessed using Cohen’s kappa. Agreement between AOC and MM was 90% and agreement between AOC and GM was 96% indicating consistent screening decisions across raters. The full texts of identified articles were obtained and screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria by AOC and 5% each by MM and GM. Agreement between AOC and MM was 100% and agreement between AOC and GM was 90.9%. Reviewers AOC and GM initially disagreed on one article, but consensus with AOC’s original decision was reached through discussion.

Data Extraction

A data extraction form was developed. Extracted information included study characteristics such as author(s), year of publication, country, study setting, sample size, date data was gathered, type of SNS, age, sampling method, measures and findings.

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists (CASP, 2018a, 2018b). CASP provides eight distinct

checklists, each tailored to different study designs. As all the studies included in the review were cross-sectional, the CASP Cross Sectional Studies Checklist which contains eleven questions assessing study quality (CASP, 2018a) was used. The first two CASP questions serve as screening items to assess whether the study addresses a clearly defined research issue and whether the chosen methods are appropriate for answering that question, while the remaining questions address three key domains: validity, results, and clinical relevance. All studies were assessed by AOC, with MM independently appraising a randomly selected 50%. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Study quality was not used as a basis for inclusion or exclusion.

As the CASP checklists do not provide an overall scoring framework, a categorisation system adopted in previous systematic reviews was applied (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018). Checklist items rated 'yes' were awarded 1 point, while items rated 'no' or 'can't tell' received 0 points. Percentage scores were then calculated for each study. The maximum possible score was 11 points for each question. Study quality was subsequently graded according to Kennelly's (2011) thresholds: ≥ 60% = "good," 45–59% = "fair," and < 45% = "poor" (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018).

Analysis

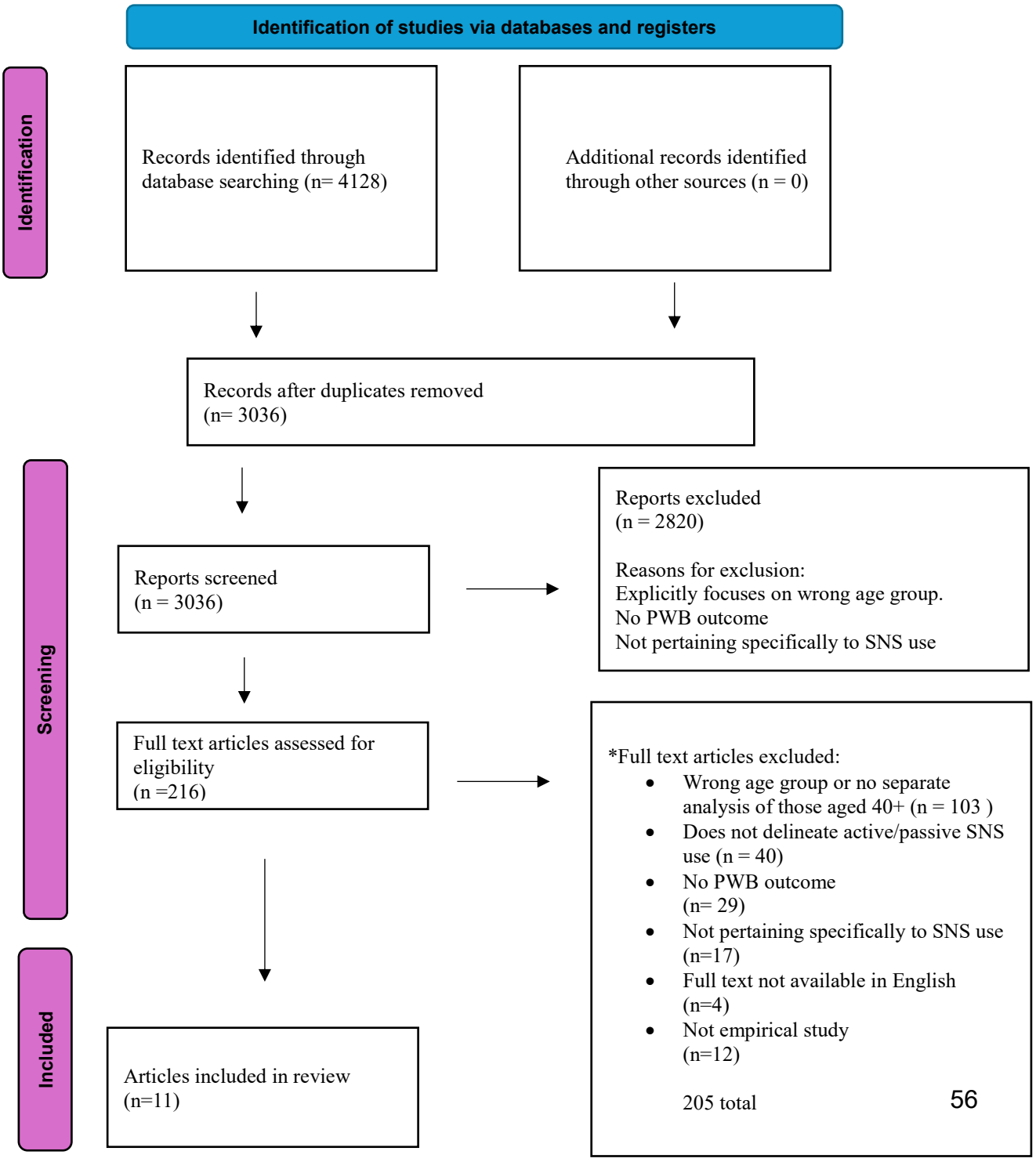
A narrative synthesis was undertaken to report the data. This method involves combining and interpreting findings from multiple studies through a structured, textual summary. It involves describing study characteristics, comparing results across studies, identifying patterns and divergences, assessing overall strength and limitations of the evidence, and drawing reasoned conclusions (Boland, 2017).

Results

A total of 4,128 articles were identified through the searches. The study flow and inclusion process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). Eleven studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Chart



*Several texts met multiple exclusion criteria; however, for consistency in reporting, age was prioritised as the primary reason for exclusion. Where a study involved participants outside the target age group, this criterion was applied even if additional reasons for exclusion were also present.

Evaluation of Quality Assessment of Included Studies

Appendix A provides a summary of study quality as evaluated with the CASP checklists. Using Kennelly's (2011) grading categories and the scoring methods adopted in earlier systematic reviews (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2018), the quality of all included studies was judged to be 'good'. Most criteria were satisfactorily addressed, including having a clearly focused issue, using appropriate methods, recruiting participants acceptably, collecting data relevant to the research question, presenting results clearly, and applying sufficiently rigorous data analysis. Some studies did not meet 'accuracy of measurement to reduce bias' criteria, as some studies did not use validated instruments to measure SNS use.

Study Characteristics

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the included studies. A total of 11 studies were included. Studies took place in China (5), the United States (3), Netherlands (2) and one study took place with participants from both the United States and Australia, with publication dates ranging from 2018 to 2025. Ten studies included a cross-sectional design and one study incorporated both cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis, although variables being studied were cross-sectional. SNS examined included Facebook, WeChat and general social media use (measured SNS activity broadly, without identifying any specific platform), with both convenience sampling and probability-based approaches reported. Across studies a range of self-report scales and validated measures were used to assess SNS activity, alongside outcomes

such as depression, wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Table 1

Study characteristics

Authors, year	Country	Study design	Time period of data collection	SNS Platform	Age	Sampling	No. of participants	SNS Measures	Outcomes Measured	Findings
Lewin et al., 2023	United States	Cross-sectional	October/November 2017	Facebook	65+	Convenience Sampling	1258	15-item self-report scale adapted from Junco (2012) to measure active and passive SNS use.	PHQ-2 Depression (Kroenke et al., 2003)	Active use linked with increased depressive symptoms. Passive use linked with decreased depressive symptoms.
Chhatwani et al., 2023	United States	Cross-sectional	May-August 2020	General	50+	Probability based	2054	Active and passive SNS use were assessed using single items adapted from Thorisdottir et al. (2019), asking how often participants engaged in passive browsing (viewing without interacting) or active browsing (liking/commenting) on major social media platforms, each rated on a 1–5 Likert scale.	PHQ-4 Depression (Kroenke et al., 2009)	Active use increased depression for both black and white participants. Passive use increased depression only of black participants
Wang & Xu, 2024	China	Cross-sectional	Does not specify	General	55+	Convenience Sampling	323	Forwarding intensity (Active use) was measured using five revised items adapted from Ellison et al.'s (2007) Facebook Intensity Scale and Wang et al.'s (2019) reposting measure (e.g., "I'm actively	Subjective Wellbeing Moum et al., (1990)	Forwarding intensity positively predicted well-being, with effects mediated by higher perceived social support and higher self-esteem. Gender moderated these pathways: the positive effects of forwarding on PSS

								forwarding information," "Forwarding has become part of my daily routine"), rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater forwarding intensity.		and self-esteem were stronger for older men, and only PSS (not self-esteem) mediated the effect for older women.
Zhang & Liang, 2023	China	Cross-sectional	2020	WeChat	45+	Probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) sampling method with implicit stratification.	11,127	Custom measure: WeChat use was coded as 1 = used WeChat in the past year, 0 = did not use. WeChat Moments sharing (Active use) was coded as 1 for respondents who shared content at least monthly (up to almost daily) and 0 for those who reported never sharing.	Centre for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1977)	WeChat Moments sharing was associated with lower odds of depression in adults aged 45+. These effects were partially mediated by better interpersonal relationships and higher social trust, indicating that social connectedness explains part of the mental-health benefit.
Kim & Shen, 2020	United States	Cross Sectional	2007-2012	Facebook	50+	Convenience sampling	982 older adults	Directed communication measured as the total number of friends tagged in users' photos. Broadcasting activities: Measured as the number of status updates and number of photos uploaded by each user.	Satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985).	For adults aged 50+, directed communication activities (e.g., tagging friends) positively predicted life satisfaction, whereas broadcasting activities (status updates, photo uploads) did not. Older adults benefited more from directed communication than younger adults.

Wei et al., 2025	China	Cross-sectional	2018 and 2020	WeChat	60+	Probability sampling	12,227	Active social media use was measured using a single item asking whether participants post on WeChat Moments (1 = yes, 0 = no).	Centre for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1977)	Posting on WeChat Moments significantly improved older adults' mental health - reducing negative emotion and increasing positive emotion, self-rated health, and health satisfaction. Benefits were stronger for female older adults and for those under age 70.
Simons et al., 2021	Netherlands	Cross-sectional	Does not specify	General	50+	Convenience sampling	410	SNS use was assessed using the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison et al., 2007), adapted to apply to whichever social network(s) each respondent used.	Well-being was measured using the Dutch MHC-SF (Lamers et al., 2011).	The majority of the sample consisted of quite passive and reactive Facebook users, preferring to read other people's posts and reacting to same, than sharing information themselves. SNS use positively associated with higher bonding and bridging social capital, as well as higher psychological and social well-being. No association was found with emotional well-being.
Ma et al., 2021	China	Cross-sectional	2020	General	60+	Convenience sampling	643	The measures of SNS use were adapted from Boer et al.	Measures of depressive symptoms were adapted from	Among older adults with hearing impairment, social media use improved

								(2021) which measured the frequency of different (active) social media activities.	the Geriatric Depression Scale 5 (Rinaldi et al., 2003).	social support and reduced social isolation, which in turn enhanced self-efficacy and reduced psychosocial loss. These mediators, social support, social isolation, psychosocial loss, and self-efficacy, partly explained the relationship between social media use and depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were lower when social support and self-efficacy were higher and when psychosocial loss and social isolation were lower.
Wolfers et al., 2020	Netherlands	Cross-sectional and longitudinal	Does not specify	Facebook	18-39, 40-64, 65+	Purposive Sampling	Middle-aged adults (40–64): 405 Older adults (65+): 284	Active and passive Facebook use were measured by how often participants posted or viewed others' posts, rated on a 1–5 scale (rarely to multiple times daily).	Stress was measured with four items from the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983).	For middle-aged adults (40-64) higher stress correlated with greater active use. For older adults (65+) higher stress correlated with greater passive use.
Evans et al., 2023	United States and Australia	Cross sectional	2019	Facebook	17-97 (Separate analysis of older population.	Convenience sampling	Total participants: 962(Did not specify number of older adults	Custom measure: Passive Facebook use was measured with a researcher-developed scale assessing the frequency of 18 passive behaviors	21-item Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1996)	For older adults, passive Facebook use was linked to lower mental ill-being. Age moderated effects such that passive use became increasingly beneficial with older age.

								(e.g., reading posts, viewing content).		
Wang et al., 2018	China	Cross sectional	Pre-covid	WeChat	18-69 years (Separate analysis of older population)	Convenience sampling	Total participant: 325 (Did not specify number of older adults	WeChat Moments use intensity (active) was measured with a revised 6-item Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison et al., 2007) assessing emotional connection and integration of WeChat Moments into daily life.	Rosenberg self esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965).	For older adults, receiving more likes from posting on WeChat Moments had stronger positive effects on personal power and social acceptance, which in turn enhanced self-esteem

Table 2 summarises the effect sizes reported or derived across the studies. Overall, the table demonstrates that most observed associations between SNS use and PWB outcomes in older adults are small. For both active and passive SNS use, effect sizes related to depressive symptoms, psychological wellbeing, and emotional wellbeing were typically classified as small or negligible (e.g., Lewin et al., 2023; Chhatwani et al., 2023; Simons et al., 2021). One study reported medium-sized effects for forwarding intensity on self esteem and subjective wellbeing (Wang & Xu, 2024) and another reported large effect sizes for tagging friends in photos on life satisfaction(Kim & Shen, 2020). However for some studies, effect sizes could not be calculated due to insufficient reporting of descriptive statistics, subgroup data for older adults, or reliance on regression coefficients alone. Where outcomes reflected psychological distress (e.g., depressive symptoms), positive values indicate associations with poorer outcomes, whereas negative values indicate associations with better outcomes. For wellbeing outcomes, the direction of interpretation is reversed

Table 2

Effect Sizes

Author	Effect size as reported in paper	Effect size
Lewin et al; 2023	Active SNS associated with depressive symptoms OR (AOR) 1.30	*d*: 0.15 Small
	Active SNS associated with depressive symptoms (when assessed alongside passive use) OR (AOR) 1.75	*d:* 0.31 Small *d*: -0.22 Small
	Passive SNS associated with depressive symptoms (when assessed alongside active use) OR (AOR) 0.67	

Chhatwani et al., 2023	Active SNS associated with Depression r= .08 Passive SNS associated with Depression r= .06	*d:* 0.16 (Small) *d:* 0.11 (Small)
Zhang & Liang, 2023	WeChat Moments Sharing associated with Depression OR (AOR) 0.85	*d*: -0.09 (Very small)
Kim & Shen, 2020	Tagging (directed communication) associated with Life satisfaction (β = .69). (large)	β = .69 (Large)
Evans et al., 2023		*Cohen's d could not be calculated for older adults because the study reported only unstandardized regression coefficients for the age-specific slopes and did not provide the standardized coefficients, correlations, or age-group–specific descriptive statistics required to classify the magnitude of the effect using established effect-size conventions.*
Wolfers et al., 2020		*Cohen's d could not be calculated as although the paper reports means and standard deviations for SNS use and nomophobia by age group, it does not report age-specific measures of stress or psychological well-being, nor age-specific associations between SNS use and well-being. Therefore, no effect sizes could be calculated for adults aged 40 and older.*
Simons et al, 2021	Passive SNS use associated with Psychological wellbeing r= 0.10	*d:* 0.201 (Small) *d:* 0.020 (Negligible)

	Passive SNS use associated with Emotional wellbeing r= 0.01	
Wang & Xu, 2024	Forwarding intensity on self esteem r=0.28	*d:* 0.587 (Medium)
	Forwarding intensity on subjective wellbeing r=0.28	*d:* 0.592 (Medium)
Ma et al, 2021	Social media use showed small negative associations with depressive symptoms (β = −.20)	β = -.20 (Small)
Wei et al, 2025		*Effect sizes could not be reported for this study because only unstandardized mean differences, regression coefficients, and ATT values were provided, and the authors did not report the group-specific standard deviations or statistical information required to convert these into standardized effect sizes.*
Wang et al, 2018		*Effect sizes could not be extracted for adults aged 40+ because the study did not report subgroup means, standard deviations, correlations, or regression coefficients for older participants*

Active SNS use and PWB

All but one of the included studies measured aspects of active SNS use. Active SNS use was operationalised in varied ways across the studies but generally incorporated activities that involve interaction with others on social media and content creation. Examples include posting status updates, photos or videos (Lewin et al., 2023; Kim & Shen, 2020; Wolfers et al., 2020), sharing content on WeChat Moments (Wei et al., 2025; Zhang & Liang) forwarding content such as images, videos or news articles (Wei et al., 2025 Zhang & Liang, 2023;) or reacting to the posts of others by commenting, liking or private messaging (Chhatwani et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2020; Simons et al., 2021.)

Across studies, the association of active SNS with PWB indicators were mixed, suggesting that the function and social meaning of active behaviours may differ across contexts. Several studies conducted in China reported favourable outcomes: behaviours such as forwarding information or sharing on WeChat Moments were associated with lower depression, higher subjective wellbeing, and increased positive affect. These outcomes were often mediated by relational resources such as perceived social support and social trust (Wei et al., 2025; Zhang & Liang, 2023) consistent with theories proposing that SNS use can enhance wellbeing when it strengthens users' perceived social resources (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Wang, 2015). Other studies identified intrapersonal mechanisms, such as self-esteem (Wang & Xu, 2024) suggesting that active SNS engagement may also support wellbeing by fostering feelings of competence or mastery. Similarly, Ma et al. (2020) reported that active messaging improved social connectedness and alleviated depressive symptoms. One study distinguished between targeted interactions such as tagging friends or sending messages and broadcasting activities like public status updates (Kim & Shen, 2020). This study found that directed active use, such as tagging friends in photos, was associated with greater life satisfaction than broadcasting activities. Findings indicate that directed communicated was

associated with PWB outcomes for older adults more than for younger adults. For example, tagging friends in photos predicted life satisfaction only for older users. Authors theorise that because tagging typically reflects shared offline experiences, it is understood as an activity that promotes bonding social capital with close-ties, which ties in with SST (Carstensen, 1992).

In contrast, several studies conducted in the United States reported associations between active SNS use and poorer mental health outcomes. Lewin et al. (2023) found that active behaviours such as posting, messaging, liking, and commenting were associated with higher depressive symptoms, while Chhatwani et al. (2023) observed similar associations between liking and commenting and depression across both Black and White participants. Wolfers et al. (2020) also reported that active posting was associated with elevated stress among middle-aged adults, although this pattern was not observed in older participants.

Taken together, these findings suggest that active SNS engagement may not be uniformly beneficial and may, in some contexts, be associated with poorer psychological outcomes. However, the studies are highly heterogeneous in terms of platforms, outcome measures, age groups, and analytic approaches, limiting the extent to which firm conclusions can be drawn. Cultural context represents one possible explanatory factor, particularly given evidence that Western SNS environments may place greater emphasis on self-presentation and social comparison, processes that have been linked to lower wellbeing in experimental and observational research (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Chou & Edge, 2012). Nevertheless, alternative explanations, including differences in measurement, platform affordances, user motivations, and sample characteristics, remain equally plausible. As such, these findings are best interpreted as highlighting contextual variability rather than a consistent negative association of active SNS use with PWB.

Passive SNS use and PWB

Four of the included articles incorporated measure of passive SNS use (Chhatwani et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2023; Lewin et al., 2023; Simons et al., 2021). One of these studies focussed solely on passive use (Evans et al., 2023). Evidence on passive SNS use was also mixed. Some findings suggested potential associations of passive SNS use and PWB. Lewin et al. (2023) found that passive activities such as browsing and viewing posts were linked to reduced depressive symptoms. Evans et al. (2023) found that passive SNS use was negatively associated with mental ill-being, meaning older participants who engaged in passive use actually reported better mental health outcomes. Simons et al. (2021) reported that their sample of predominantly passive and reactive users demonstrated higher levels of PWB but the same effects were not observed for emotional wellbeing. Wolfers et al. (2020) reported that passive Facebook use was associated with higher stress among older adults in the Netherlands, and Chhatwani et al. (2023) observed that passive browsing during the COVID-19 pandemic increased depressive symptoms for Black, but not White, participants in the United States.

Impact of the COVID-19 Context

Across the 11 included studies, seven included the timeframe under which data was collected, with four studies not including this information. Four studies collected their data or were published before the Covid 19 pandemic (Evans et al., 2023; Kim & Shen, 2020; Lewin et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2018) and four collected data during the timeframe of covid restrictions (Chhatwani et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2021; Wei et al., 2025; Zhang & Liang, 2023). The studies conducted prior to the pandemic produced variable results, with one linking active use with greater life satisfaction (Kim & Shen, 2020), another finding that for older adults receiving likes on WeChat Moments was linked to higher self-esteem (Wang et al., 2018), and another highlighted heightened depressive symptoms linked to both active and passive engagement

(Lewin et al., 2023) . In contrast, studies carried out during the period of COVID-19 restrictions in China more consistently reported beneficial outcomes for active use, where sharing and messaging on WeChat were associated with reduced depression, greater positive affect, and improved social connectedness (Ma et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2025; Zhang & Liang, 2023). By comparison, U.S. data collected during the pandemic pointed to elevated risks, with active and passive use both linked to increased depression (Chhatwani et al., 2023).

Pathways linking SNS use and PWB.

A number of studies have proposed mediating and moderating mechanisms through which SNS use may be associated with psychological wellbeing in older adults. For example, Wang and Xu (2024) reported that forwarding intensity (i.e., sharing content) was associated with higher subjective wellbeing, with this relationship partially mediated by perceived social support and self-esteem. These pathways were further moderated by gender: among older men, both perceived social support and self-esteem mediated the association, whereas among older women, mediation occurred primarily through perceived social support. The authors interpret these findings as reflecting gendered patterns of SNS engagement, whereby women may prioritise relational connection and men may place greater emphasis on competence and self-efficacy.

Similarly, Zhang and Liang (2023) found that the association between WeChat Moments sharing and lower depressive symptoms was mediated by social trust and interpersonal relationships, with social trust emerging as the stronger explanatory factor. This suggests that SNS engagement may be linked to mental health outcomes not only through maintaining close-ties, but also through fostering broader perceptions of trust and social cohesion.

This mechanism may be shaped by platform and cultural context. WeChat Moments

operates within a relatively closed, socially monitored network, which may limit hostile or disinhibited interactions and help sustain trust. By contrast, SNS environments in Western contexts are often more weak-tie oriented and less regulated, potentially increasing exposure to online disinhibition and toxic interactions that undermine trust and attenuate wellbeing benefits (Suler, 2004).

Simons et al. (2021) likewise reported that active SNS use was associated with higher bonding and bridging social capital, which were in turn linked to greater psychological and social wellbeing. Ma et al. (2021) identified social connectedness as a key pathway linking active SNS use to reduced depressive symptoms among hearing-impaired older adults, with network expansion showing the strongest association.

However, it is important to note that all of these studies employ cross-sectional designs, meaning that the direction of these proposed pathways cannot be established. While authors generally model SNS use as antecedent to social and psychological resources, the reverse interpretation is equally plausible: older adults with higher wellbeing, stronger self-esteem, greater social trust, or more extensive social networks may be more inclined to engage actively on SNSs. Indeed, individuals who are already socially connected or psychologically resilient may be better positioned to initiate sharing, participate in online discourse, or perceive SNS interactions as supportive. As such, the mediating mechanisms identified in these studies should be interpreted as associative pathways rather than causal processes. Together, this body of work highlights that links between SNS use and wellbeing in later life may be dynamic and reciprocal, shaped by pre-existing social and psychological resources as much as by SNS engagement itself.

2.5 Discussion

The current systematic review aimed to synthesise existing evidence on the relationship between active and passive SNS use with the PWB indicators of middle-aged and older adults. The findings across the included studies were varied, with active and passive SNS use linked to both positive and negative psychological outcomes. Importantly, all included studies employed cross-sectional designs which substantially limits causal inference. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether SNS use influences psychological wellbeing, whether individuals with higher or lower wellbeing engage with SNSs in different ways, or whether both are shaped by unmeasured third variables.

The literature was characterised by considerable heterogeneity in the operationalisation of SNS use (e.g., platform, activity type, intensity), and wide variation in cultural context, age range, and analytic approach. This combination of methodological factors increases the risk that some observed associations reflect contextual artefacts rather than robust or generalisable effects.

Small effect sizes characterised most of the associations reviewed, suggesting that relationships between SNS behaviours and PWB in older adults are generally modest. Notably, Wang and Xu (2024) reported medium-sized effects for forwarding intensity and both self-esteem and subjective wellbeing. Kim & Shen (2020) found a large effect size in the association between tagging Facebook friends in photos and life satisfaction. These effects are larger than those observed in other studies. Given the cross-sectional design, the direction of this association remains unclear, and it is equally plausible that individuals with higher self-esteem or wellbeing are more inclined to engage in frequent forwarding and those higher in life satisfaction to engage with tagging others in photos. These findings therefore warrant cautious interpretation and may not generalise to broader patterns of SNS engagement among

older adults.

Within these limitations, several contextual factors may be hypothesised to contribute to variability across studies. Cultural setting was one such factor, with active SNS use more frequently associated with beneficial wellbeing outcomes in studies conducted in China compared to those from Western countries. Prior comparative research suggests that cultural orientation shapes how SNSs are used and experienced. For example, Cho et al. (2013) found that users in collectivist cultures such as Korea tend to maintain smaller, more tightly knit online networks and engage in SNS use primarily to reinforce existing close relationships, while users in individualistic cultures such as the United States more often use SNSs for self-expression, broader network expansion, and direct self-disclosure (Cho et al., 2013). These differences align with broader cultural norms around group harmony, modesty and avoidance of self-promotion in collectivist contexts.

However, cultural explanations cannot be disentangled from other contextual influences. Several Chinese studies were conducted during periods of prolonged and severe COVID-19 lockdowns, which dramatically restricted in-person social interaction. Under China's zero-COVID policy, extended mobility restrictions and social isolation were linked to increased loneliness and psychological distress (Yan et al., 2023). In this context, active SNS use may have taken on heightened functional and emotional value as a substitute for offline contact. Research suggests that collectivist orientations may have been further strengthened during the pandemic (Han et al., 2021), potentially amplifying the importance of maintaining social cohesion through digital means. As such, positive associations between active SNS use and wellbeing observed in these studies may reflect the interaction of cultural norms, platform affordances, and situational necessity, rather than stable or universal effects.

Conversely, several studies conducted in Western contexts linked active SNS use to poorer PWB including higher depressive symptoms and stress (e.g., Lewin et al., 2023;

Chhatwani et al., 2023; Wolfers et al., 2020). One possible theory relates to the nature of active engagement in these settings, where posting, commenting, and liking may be more strongly tied to self-presentational concerns and upward social comparison. Experimental and observational research has shown that self-focused online presentation and comparison processes can undermine wellbeing (Chou & Edge, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010;). However, these interpretations remain speculative, as the reviewed studies differed substantially in platforms examined, outcome measures, and analytic strategies. It is therefore equally plausible that observed negative associations reflect measurement differences, user motivations, or selection effects, rather than cultural norms.

Findings related to passive SNS use diverged from much of the literature on younger populations. With the exception of one subgroup in Chhatwani et al. (2023), passive use was generally associated with neutral or positive PWB outcomes among older adults, contrasting with evidence linking passive browsing to envy and reduced wellbeing in adolescents and young adults (Thorisdottir et al., 2019). One study focusing specifically on passive SNS use found a significant negative association with mental illbeing (Evans et al., 2023). It has been theorised that older adults may engage in passive SNS use more selectively and intentionally than younger users (Hayes et al., 2015). Older adults typically maintain smaller online networks composed primarily of close-ties, and a higher proportion of ‘real friends’ within one’s network has been linked to lower loneliness and social isolation across age groups (Hayes et al., 2015). Additionally, age-related positivity effects suggest that older adults preferentially attend to and remember positive information (Reed et al., 2014), potentially shaping passive SNS engagement in ways that support rather than undermine wellbeing.

Several studies also examined mediating and moderating pathways linking SNS use with PWB, highlighting the role of psychosocial resources such as perceived social support, trust, self-esteem, and social connectedness. For example, Wang and Xu (2024) found that

forwarding intensity was associated with greater wellbeing via perceived social support and self-esteem, with gender moderating these associations. Zhang and Liang (2023) reported that WeChat Moments sharing was associated with lower depressive symptoms, partly mediated by social trust, while Simons et al. (2021) linked active SNS use to bonding and bridging social capital, which in turn related to psychological and social wellbeing.

Platform characteristics may also be relevant; WeChat Moments operates as a semi-private space limited largely to known contacts (Harwit, 2017), prioritising relational exchange over public broadcasting, which aligns with evidence that close-tie communication is more strongly associated with wellbeing than broader dissemination (Quinn, 2019). However, these mediating and moderating pathways should be interpreted as associative rather than causal. It is equally plausible that individuals with higher wellbeing, stronger self-esteem, or greater social trust are more inclined to engage actively, perceive interactions as supportive, and benefit from SNS use.

Taken together, the findings of this review align with Valkenburg et al.'s (2021) conclusion that associations between active and passive SNS use and wellbeing are inconsistent and context-dependent. While Valkenburg et al. identified such heterogeneity across age groups in the general population, the present review demonstrates that similar complexity characterises middle-aged and older adults. Rather than indicating that SNS use is inherently beneficial or harmful, the evidence suggests that its associations with wellbeing may be contingent on cultural norms, situational factors, platform affordances, and individual characteristics, operating within a literature constrained by methodological limitations. Future longitudinal and experimental research is needed to clarify the direction, durability, and boundary conditions of these associations.

Strengths and limitations

Several strengths were evident across the studies included in this review. Several Chinese studies drew on large, nationally representative samples, increasing the generalisability of their findings. Many studies investigated WeChat and its Moments function, which are central to SNS use among older adults in China. This expands knowledge beyond Western-centric platforms like Facebook. By covering both Western and Eastern cultural contexts, the review provides a more balanced perspective on how culture and platform may be associated with PWB outcomes.

This review involved a comprehensive search using five databases. This is the first review to focus on middle-aged and older adults and associations between active and passive SNS use and PWB.

Finally, compliance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021) ensures transparency in the reporting of findings. A subject librarian was also consulted when developing the search strategy. We believe that these steps enabled a comprehensive search of the available evidence.

A limitation of this review is that there was variation across studies in how active and passive SNS use were operationalised, complicating direct comparisons. Active use ranged from broadcasting (e.g., posting to a wide audience) to directed communication (e.g., private messaging), which may limit comparability across studies.. Similarly, passive use was inconsistently defined and measured.

In addition, publication bias is a relevant concern: studies reporting significant or positive associations between SNS use and wellbeing may be more likely to be published than those reporting null or adverse findings, particularly in a field with strong public and policy interest.

All included studies employed cross-sectional designs, with no random allocation or

experimental manipulation of SNS use. As a result, causal inferences cannot be drawn. It remains unclear whether SNS use influences PWB, whether individuals with higher or lower wellbeing are more inclined to engage in SNS use. Older adults who are more socially connected, psychologically resilient, cognitively confident, or open to new technologies may be both more likely to use SNSs and to report higher wellbeing, creating associations that reflect selection effects rather than causal impacts of SNS use. This raises the possibility of strong selection effects, whereby those who choose to engage in SNS use differ systematically from those who do not.

Future research could strengthen causal inferences by employing longitudinal and experimental designs that allow for the examination of temporal ordering between SNS behaviours and PWB.

The evidence base would also benefit from the development of clearer, standardised definitions and operationalisations of key constructs such as active and passive SNS use and wellbeing. The current literature varies widely in how these terms are measured, making it difficult to compare findings across studies or draw firm conclusions about underlying mechanisms. Establishing agreed-upon frameworks would strengthen methodological rigour and improve the interpretability of results.

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Chapter 3: Systematic Review Supplementary Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken to conduct the systematic review outlined in Chapter 2. The review followed established guidelines for systematic reviews in the social sciences to ensure methodological transparency, replicability, and minimisation of bias (PRISMA, 2020).

3.1 Defining the review question and conducting a literature search

Formulating a clear and focused question is a critical first step in systematic review methodology, as it defines the scope, inclusion criteria, and search strategy (Boland et al., 2017). The present review was guided by the following research question: 'What is the relationship between types of SNS use and PWB among middle-aged and older adults?' Firstly, the PROSPERO database was searched to confirm that no similar systematic reviews were currently registered. A preliminary scoping exercise was then carried out to assess the breadth of existing research across PsycINFO and Google Scholar using broad combinations of terms related to "social media," "social networking," "middle-aged," "older adults" and "psychological wellbeing". This question was refined using the PECO framework as outlined below:

Population: Adults aged 40+ years

Exposure: SNS usage (Active or passive)

Comparator: None

Outcomes: Associations between type of social network usage and psychological wellbeing in older adults or qualitative findings exploring these themes.

Study Design: Any quantitative, qualitative or mixed designs

Setting: Community

3.2 Developing a detailed protocol ethical approval

A review protocol detailing the rationale, planned search strategy and eligibility criteria, quality appraisal methods, procedures for data extraction and synthesis and a full project timeline was submitted for review to the Clinical Psychology Research Ethics Committee within University College Cork in January 2024. Following the completion of recommended revisions, the revised application was submitted for ethical review in March 2024 and was granted approval in April 2024. An ethics amendment was submitted in February 2025. The original inclusion criterion for participant age in the systematic review was set at 65 years and older, reflecting a conventional definition of older adulthood. However, an amendment was made to revise this threshold to include adults aged 40 years and above. It had become evident that the literature lacked consistency in defining older adults, with several studies operationalising this group as aged 50 and above. Expanding the age range to 40+ allowed for the inclusion of a broader body of relevant evidence while maintaining alignment with the conceptual focus on adult ageing and technology use. This approach is consistent with methodological guidance recommending flexibility in eligibility criteria when variability in definitions exists across primary studies (Booth et al., 2021).

The protocol was subsequently registered with PROSPERO, an international database for the prospective registration of systematic reviews. PROSPERO enables the identification of ongoing reviews on related topics. thereby reducing unnecessary duplication of systematic reviews. It also enhances transparency and minimised the risk of reporting bias by allowing the completed project to be evaluated against the original registered protocol.

3.3 Search strategy

The search strategy was developed through an iterative process. Insights from the preliminary scoping review informed the identification of relevant search terms and subject headings.

Searches were conducted on five databases: PsychINFO, Web of Science, Medline, International Bibliography of Social Sciences and EBSCO Psychology Databases. These were chosen on consultation with a subject librarian These databases were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of psychological, social science, and health related research. The strategy was structured using the PECO framework, in consultation with a subject librarian and my academic supervisor to align search terms with the review question. Synonyms and related terms for each concept such as “social networking sites”, “social media”, “older adults”, and “wellbeing” were combined using Boolean operators (‘AND’, ‘OR’) and truncation. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English from. The final strategy adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and established recommendations for transparent search design (Booth et al., 2021).

3.4 Screening studies against pre-defined eligibility criteria

The results of database searches were imported onto Rayyan, systematic review management platform. All studies identified through the database searches were screened systematically against the pre-defined eligibility criteria established in the review protocol. Following the removal of duplicates, titles and abstracts were first reviewed to exclude clearly irrelevant articles. The remaining records were then subjected to full-text screening to determine final inclusion. Screening was conducted using the inclusion and exclusion criteria developed in accordance with the PECOS framework, ensuring consistency with the review’s aims and scope. Throughout the process, screening decisions and reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were recorded to maintain transparency on Microsoft Excel. It was agreed between my supervisors and I that a cross check of the screening process would take place at the title and abstract screening phase and the full text screening stage. Both supervisors would cross check 5% of articles each at both stages (10% overall at both stages.) At each stage, my supervisors

independently reviewed a subset of titles and abstracts or full-text papers, applying the same predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A meeting was held to review and discuss any discrepancies between screening decisions. Only a small number of discrepancies arose, primarily during cross checking of the title and abstract screening. These typically occurred when abstracts did not provide sufficient information to determine eligibility for instance, when participant age ranges were unspecified or when distinctions between active and passive SNS use were unclear. Such minor inconsistencies were readily resolved through discussion and by consulting the full-text articles for clarification. One paper was disagreed upon in the full text screening stage but this discrepancy was resolved upon discussion. The overall selection process was summarised using a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

3.5 Quality assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Cross-Sectional Studies (CASP, 2023). This tool was selected because the majority of studies identified in the review employed cross-sectional designs, The CASP framework offers a structured and transparent approach to evaluating key aspects of methodological rigour, including the clarity of research aims, appropriateness of study design, recruitment strategy, measurement validity, control of confounding variables, and the relevance of results to the research question. Its use in systematic reviews of observational research is well-established, as it promotes consistency and reduces bias in the appraisal process (Khan et al., 2003). Each study was independently assessed against the checklist criteria, and overall quality ratings were recorded to inform the interpretation of findings rather than as a basis for exclusion.

3.6 Data extraction

A structured data extraction process was implemented to ensure consistency and transparency in capturing relevant information from each included study, using guidelines set out by Boland et al., (2017). In consultation with supervisors, the key data items to be extracted were first identified, with careful consideration of the information most relevant to the research question and most useful for readers' understanding of each study. For this review, the extracted data included study characteristics and outcome measures. A data extraction tool was created on Microsoft Excel and included columns on authors, year, country of research, study design, when data was gathered, types of SNS, age, sampling, SNS measures, outcomes measured and findings. The identified data were then systematically extracted from each included study and entered into the data extraction table. This information was then refined and finalised to ensure accuracy before incorporating the extracted information into the systematic review report.

Conclusion

The review process was conducted in a rigorous and systematic way, guided by established methodological standards and reinforced through repeated checks for accuracy and consistency. Working through these procedures allowed me to generate a well-defined search strategy and to produce a detailed, coherent synthesis of the literature that directly addressed the research question.

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Chapter 4: Older Adults' Experiences of Social Networking Site Use and Psychological Well-Being: A Mixed-Methods Study

4.1 Abstract

Introduction: Older adults are increasingly engaging with social network sites (SNSs), yet evidence regarding SNS's relationship to measures of psychological well-being (PWB) remains mixed. This study explored how different types of SNS use relate to PWB in older adults, and whether perceived social support and shyness influence these relationships.

Methods: A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative survey data from 101 participants with qualitative interviews (n = 11). Measures included SNS use types, perceived social support, shyness, and indicators of PWB (positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction). Data were analysed using hierarchal multiple regression and reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: SNS use (close-ties, weak-ties or diversionary use) was not a unique predictor of outcomes of PWB. However, both close and weak-tie SNS use were indirect predictors of higher positive affect and life satisfaction and lower negative affect, both mediated by perceived social support. Shyness moderated the association between weak-tie SNS use and wellbeing outcomes across positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction. Higher levels of weak-tie SNS engagement were linked to higher negative affect and lower life satisfaction among shyer individuals, whereas no moderation effects were found for close-tie SNS use. Thematic analysis revealed that SNSs were used to maintain family and friendship ties, exchange reciprocal emotional support, pursuing shared interests, and engaging in nostalgic reflection. Some participants also reported negative experiences online and described

selectively engaging with platforms to preserve PWB. SNSs were viewed as practical tools that complemented, rather than replaced, offline interaction.

Conclusion: These findings suggest that for older adults the associations between SNS use and psychological wellbeing are related not to whether SNS are used, but to how selectively and meaningfully they are used to maintain supportive and emotionally rewarding connections. Clinical implications and implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Older Adults, Social Network Usage, Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, Psychological Wellbeing, Perceived Social Support, Shyness

4.2 Introduction

The global population is ageing rapidly. According to data from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the proportion of individuals aged 60 years and older is projected to increase from 12% in 2015 to 22% by 2050, with this demographic shift largely driven by rising life expectancy worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2018). As a result, older adults represent an increasingly significant segment of the population, highlighting the importance of understanding factors that support psychological wellbeing in later life.

Older adulthood is often accompanied by changes that increase vulnerability to social isolation and loneliness. Factors such as chronic illness, physical impairments, regular medication use, and reduced engagement in hobbies can heighten feelings of social disconnection (Arslantas et al., 2015). In addition, bereavement and living alone (Savikko et al., 2005), along with reduced social participation associated with lower income (Nissanholtz-Gannot & Peretz-Dayan, 2023), may further limit opportunities for social interaction, placing older adults at increased risk of loneliness and social isolation.

Loneliness is a subjective emotional experience distinct from objective social isolation and reflects a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships rather than simply low social support (Yanguas et al., 2018). Both loneliness and social isolation are associated with adverse outcomes in later life, including increased psychological distress, depressive symptoms, and poorer physical health (Alpert, 2017; Dziechciaż & Filip, 2014). These risks were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when infection control measures disproportionately increased social isolation among older adults, leading to heightened loneliness and depressive symptoms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020; Krendl & Perry, 2021).

However, vulnerability is not uniform: high-quality intimate relationships are

consistently linked to better psychological adjustment and more adaptive physiological stress responses (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), while belonging to psychologically meaningful social groups can foster connection and support that buffer distress, a process described as the "social cure" (Jetten et al., 2017).

The importance of perceived social support is further underscored by lifespan theories of social motivation. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) proposes that perceptions of future time shape social goals across adulthood, with younger adults prioritising knowledge acquisition and new social ties when time is perceived as expansive, and older adults increasingly emphasising emotionally meaningful goals as time is perceived as limited (Carstensen, 1993; Carstensen et al., 2003). In later life, this shift highlights the particular salience of close, supportive relationships for psychological wellbeing.

Within this theoretical context, social networking sites (SNSs) may offer older adults a means of maintaining social connection and mitigating loneliness and social isolation. SNSs are Web 2.0–based platforms that rely on user-generated content, facilitate online connections, and involve the creation of user profiles maintained by the platform (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Engagement with SNSs and online messaging services may therefore support relationship maintenance in later life, particularly when physical mobility or geographic distance limits face-to-face interaction.

A recent systematic review by Lei et al. (2024) examined 64 studies investigating the relationship between SNS use and psychosocial outcomes in older adults, including loneliness, depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, and quality of life. Cross-sectional studies commonly reported positive associations between SNS use and indicators of wellbeing, such as lower loneliness and depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction and quality of life. However, most studies reported no significant associations with anxiety or perceived social connectedness, and evidence from longitudinal designs was inconsistent, suggesting that

causal relationships remain unclear. The authors attributed these mixed findings to substantial heterogeneity in study design, outcome measures, and operationalisations of SNS use (Lei et al., 2024).

A key limitation of previous research is the tendency to treat SNS use as a single, undifferentiated construct, without accounting for differences in type of engagement. Evidence from adolescent and young adult populations suggests that active SNS use, such as direct communication with close-ties, is associated with higher psychological wellbeing, whereas passive consumption and weak-tie engagement are linked to poorer outcomes (Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Yang & Brown, 2013). These distinctions may be particularly salient in older adulthood. Consistent with SST, older adults may engage with SNS primarily to maintain emotionally meaningful close-ties rather than expand social networks, rendering perceived social support a key pathway linking SNS use to wellbeing.

The present study addresses these limitations by using the Social Network Site Use in Older Adults Scale (Newman et al., 2021), which distinguishes between close-tie use, weak-tie use, and diversionary browsing. These distinctions are informed by social network theory differentiating strong and weak-ties (Granovetter, 1973) and uses-and-gratifications frameworks identifying social, informational, and entertainment-oriented SNS use (Park et al., 2009). This validated, age-appropriate measure enables a more nuanced assessment of how different forms of SNS engagement relate to psychological wellbeing.

Individual differences may moderate associations between SNS use and psychological wellbeing. The present study focuses on shyness, defined as discomfort in social situations and a tendency to avoid face-to-face interaction (Cheek & Buss, 1981), given its relevance to preferences for computer-mediated communication. Shyness is typically conceptualised as a form of social inhibition characterised by self-consciousness, discomfort, and behavioural

withdrawal in interpersonal contexts (Zimbardo et al., 1977), and has been linked to both social functioning and psychological wellbeing.

It is closely related to constructs such as social anxiety and has been associated with reduced social participation and difficulties in initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). Shyness has been linked to communication difficulties during the formation of relationships, driven by negative expectations about social interactions and a fear of negative evaluation (Jackson et al., 1997). From a theoretical perspective, individual differences in shyness may influence how people engage with social environments, including digital contexts. Within the framework of Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 1992), older adults prioritise emotionally meaningful social interactions; however, individuals higher in shyness may experience barriers to engaging in such interactions, potentially limiting the extent to which they benefit from both offline and online social opportunities. Conversely, a desire to develop rewarding social relationships may increase shy individuals' reliance on computer-mediated communication (CMC). In line with this, Sheeks and Birchmeier (2007) found that shy individuals were more likely than non-shy individuals to report forming satisfying relationships through online communication. Sheeks and Birchmeier proposed that the perceived control features of computer-mediated communication may lead individuals with social inhibitions, including those who are shy or socially anxious, to use the Internet as a means of meeting their social and intimacy needs. These findings suggest that SNS features may be particularly appealing for individuals higher in shyness, potentially enabling older adults to engage socially in less threatening ways that support psychological wellbeing.

Several variables beyond the independent and dependent variables were considered as potential covariates. A scoping review of biopsychosocial predictors of mental health in older adults identified age as a key biological factor, with increasing age associated with greater risk of cognitive impairment, depressed mood, and poorer quality of life (Murniati et al., 2022), as well as a higher prevalence of physical health conditions linked to anxiety and depression. Gender differences have also been reported, with women experiencing higher psychological distress (Murniati et al., 2022). Health-related behaviours and functioning, including smoking, sleep disturbance, and difficulties with activities of daily living, are similarly associated with poorer mental health and wellbeing. Social factors further contribute, with marriage appearing protective against depression in later life, while being unmarried is associated with increased risk (Murniati et al., 2022). Additional contextual influences include employment status, socioeconomic status, and bereavement (Mahmoodi et al., 2022).

Despite increasing interest in the social and emotional effects of SNS, research focusing specifically on older adults remains limited. SST proposes that older adults prioritise emotionally meaningful connections, suggesting that perceived social support may be an important factor shaping how SNS use relates to well-being. However, these constructs remain underexplored in studies of SNS use among older adults. Lastly there has been a dearth of qualitative studies exploring older adults experiences with SNS use and PWB. This study seeks to address these gaps by addressing the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the overall use of SNS and PWB in older adults?
RQ2: Does this relationship remain significant when controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors know to influence wellbeing in older age (e.g. employment status, bereavement, gender?

RQ3: Does shyness moderate the relationship between SNS use and PWB, such that the strength or direction of this association varies depending on levels of shyness?

RQ4: Does perceived social connectedness mediate the relationship between SNS use and PWB, such that SNS use enhances perceived social connectedness, which in turn is associated with greater wellbeing?

RQ5: Are different types of SNS use (e.g. maintaining close ties, maintaining weak ties, and diversionary use) differentially associated with PWB in older adults

Qualitative research question: How do older adults describe their experiences of social networking site use and its perceived impact on their psychological wellbeing?

4.3 Methods

Research design

The study employed a mixed-methods research design using quantitative methods and analysis to evaluate SNS usage, constructs of PWB and control variables. The quantitative survey was hosted using the computer software Qualtrics XM. The second arm of the study utilised qualitative methods and analysis to explore older people's perspectives and experiences of using SNS and its influences on PWB constructs.

Participants and data collection

Participants were eligible if they were aged 65 years or older. Participation was open to the general population to facilitate a diverse sample. Quantitative participants were initially recruited through community and local services supporting older adults; however, when this approach yielded insufficient numbers (n = 69), recruitment was supplemented via Prolific (n = 89) to achieve the required sample size. Prolific is an online research platform that connects researchers with participants. Participants are compensated £6 per hour. The final sample comprised 54.4% female and 45.6% male participants, aged 65–93 years (M = 69.69, SD = 4.41). Participants for the qualitative component were recruited via an invitation included at the end of the Qualtrics survey.

Recruitment took place between January and May 2025. Sample size requirements were determined using Green's (1991) guideline for multiple regression ($N \geq 104 + k$). With 13 predictors, a minimum sample of approximately 117 participants was targeted to ensure adequate power. Of the 158 participants who initiated the survey, 101 completed it in full. Missing data were addressed using pairwise deletion for bivariate correlations and listwise deletion for t-tests, regression, and mediation analyses.

Recruitment for the qualitative component aimed to achieve data saturation, defined

as the point at which no new codes or themes emerge (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Although the required number of interviews cannot be predetermined, prior research suggests saturation is typically reached within 10–16 interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Namey et al., 2019). Accordingly, qualitative interviews were conducted with eleven participants (five female, six male), aged 65–78 years (M = 71.18, SD = 3.82). The majority of participants were based in Ireland (n = 9), with two participants residing in the United Kingdom. In terms of employment status most participants were retired (n = 9), while two remained in employment at the time of the study. Five participants were recruited via the University of the Third Age, three through the online research platform Prolific, two through the Age Action newsletter and one participant was recruited through convenience sampling of researchers own networks.

Procedure

After accessing the study via an online link, participants provided informed consent before completing the quantitative survey. The survey included demographic questions followed by measures of SNS use, PWB, perceived social support, shyness and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants could withdraw at any point prior to submission. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to volunteer for a follow-up qualitative interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Measures

The main study outcomes are measures of PWB with SNS usage as an independent variable, shyness as a moderator and perceived levels of social connection as a potential mediator.

Positive and negative affect were measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson & Clarke, 1988), a 20-item scale comprising two 10-item subscales assessing positive affect and negative affect. Items were summed to create positive and negative affect scores, with higher scores indicating greater levels of positive or negative affect. Both subscales demonstrate high internal consistency (PA α = .86–.90; NA α = .84–.87) and acceptable test–retest reliability over an eight-week interval (PA r = .47–.68; NA r = .39–.71). Construct validity was supported by the relative independence of PA and NA (r = −.12 to −.23) and strong convergent correlations with corresponding affective factors (r = .89–.95) (Watson & Clarke, 1988). In the current study, the scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = .73).

Life satisfaction was assessed using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), a 5-item self-report measure designed to assess individuals' global cognitive judgments of their life satisfaction. Responses were summed to create a total score, with possible scores ranging from 5 to 35, and higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction. The SWLS demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .87) and good test–retest reliability over a two-month period (r = .82). Evidence for construct validity was shown through moderate to strong positive correlations with other measures of subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction (r = .50–.75), and moderate negative correlations with negative affect (r = −.32 to −.37) (Diener et al., 1985). In the current study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .91).

Types of SNS use were assessed using the Social Network Sites–Older Adult Scale (Newman et al., 2021), a 19-item measure comprising five subscales: maintaining close-ties, maintaining/strengthening weak-ties, diversion, positive affect, and negative affect. Subscale scores were summed, with higher scores indicating greater engagement. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency overall (α = .85), acceptable reliability for most

subscales (α = .81–.82), lower reliability for the two-item negative affect subscale (α = .59), and moderate to good one-week test–retest reliability (α = .82). In the present sample, internal consistency was good for the SNS close ties subscale (α = .87) and acceptable for the SNS Weak-ties (α = .77) and SNS Diversion (α = .79) subscales.

Shyness was assessed using the Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS; Cheek & Buss, 1981). Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were summed to create a total score, with possible scores ranging from 13 to 65, and higher scores indicating greater levels of shyness. The RCBS has demonstrated high internal consistency (typically α = .85–.90; Cheek & Buss, 1981; Hopko et al., 2005) and good temporal stability (Hopko et al., 2005) and test-retest reliability over a 90-day interval of approximately (r=0.74). Convergent validity has been shown through moderate to strong positive correlations with related constructs such as social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and behavioural inhibition (r ≈ .40–.70; Hopko et al., 2005), while discriminant validity is supported by negative associations with extraversion and sociability (r ≈ −.40 to −.60; Cheek & Buss, 1981; Crozier, 2005). In the present sample, the shyness scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .92).

Perceived social support was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988), a 12-item self-report measure assessing perceived support. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). Items were averaged to create an overall perceived social support score, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support. The MSPSS has demonstrated excellent internal consistency (total scale α ≈ .85–.91; subscales α ≈ .85–.90; Zimet et al., 1988; Zimet et al., 1990). Evidence for construct validity is supported by moderate to strong positive correlations with measures of wellbeing and life satisfaction (r ≈ .40–.60) and moderate negative correlations with depression and psychological distress (r ≈

−.30 to −.50) (Zimet et al., 1988; Zimet et al., 1990). In the present sample, the perceived social support scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .92).

Frequency and duration of SNS use were assessed using brief self-developed items designed to capture general patterns of SNS engagement. These items were constructed to provide clear, easily interpretable indicators of behavioural exposure to SNS use. Frequency of SNS use was measured with a single item asking participants how often they use social networking sites on average. Responses were recorded on a six-point ordinal scale with response options ranging from "less frequently than once a month" to "several times a day". Higher scores indicated more frequent SNS use.

Duration of SNS use was assessed using a single item measuring the amount of time spent daily using social networking sites. Participants selected one of four response categories: "little or no time," "1–3 hours," "4–7 hours," or "8 hours or more." Responses were treated as an indicator of daily SNS use, with higher scores reflecting greater time spent on SNS.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analyses comprised hierarchical multiple regression, moderation, and mediation analyses to examine associations between SNS use, PWB, shyness, and perceived social support. Hierarchical regression was employed to assess the incremental contribution of theoretically relevant predictors while controlling for demographic and psychosocial covariates. Moderation analyses tested whether associations between SNS use and wellbeing varied by shyness. Mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS to examine perceived social support as a mediating mechanism. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the current study was obtained from University College Cork Clinical Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

4.4 Results

Quantitative results

Table 3 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic	*n*	Frequency
Age		
65-69	70	61.8%
70-74	28	24.4%
75-79	14	12.1%
80-84	2	1.8%
85-89	0	0%
90-94	1	0.9%
Gender		
Female	68	54.4
Male	57	45.6
Marital status		
Single	13	10.5%
Married/ Domestic partnership	84	67.7%
Widowed	11	8.9%
Divorced	13	10.5%
Separated	3	2.5%
Employment status		
Employed for wages	17	13.7%
Self employed	8	6.5%
Retired	93	75.0%
Unemployed	5	4.0%
Homemaker	54	7.09%
Bereavement in last three years?		
Yes	48	39%
No	75	61%
Self reported health		
1- Very unhealthy	3	2.4%
2	7	5.6%
3	37	29.8%
4	58	46.8%
5- Very healthy	19	15.3%
Poor quality of sleep in past month		
Always	4	3.2%
Very Often	27	21.8%
Sometimes	45	36.3%
Rarely	31	25%
Never	17	13.7%
Household net annual income		
€0 - €16,558	15	12.2%
€16,559 - €55,149	81	65.9%

€55,150 - €100,000	25	20.3%
> €100,000	2	1.6%
Difficulties carrying out activities of daily living		
Yes	12	9.7%
No	112	90.3%

Participants reported high levels of SNS engagement. Most used SNS daily (75.6%), with smaller proportions reporting use on 5–6 days (2.4–6.5%), 4 days (5.7%), or 1–3 days per week (7.3%). In terms of duration, the majority (72.6%) reported spending 1–3 hours per day on SNS, while 14.5% reported little or no daily use. Heavier use was less common, with 11.3% reporting 3–7 hours and 1.6% reporting 7 hours or more per day.

Preliminary Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all key study variables (see Table 4).

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for main variables

Variable	***N***	**Min**	**Max**	***M***	**Median**	***SD***
Positive Affect	118	10	50	33.42	34.00	6.99
Negative Affect	119	10	43	13.87	12.00	4.96
Life Satisfaction	121	5	35	23.63	26.00	6.91
Perceived Social Support	119	15	84	64.25	66.00	12.93
Shyness	116	13	59	32.22	31.00	10.40
SNS use close ties	122	5	20	13.90	14.00	3.81
SNS use weak Ties	120	5	20	9.78	10.00	2.91

Normality was assessed using statistical tests and visual inspection. Histograms and Q–Q plots indicated mild deviations, with positive skew for negative affect and negative skew for

positive affect, and Shapiro–Wilk tests were significant for most variables. Normality statistics are reported in Appendix J. Despite these deviations, parametric tests were used for primary analyses due to the adequate sample size (N = 101), as the Central Limit Theorem supports the robustness of mean-based parametric procedures to moderate non-normality at this sample size (Lumley et al., 2002; Blanca et al., 2017).

Although Pearson correlations are sensitive to non-normality, simulation studies indicate that Pearson's *r* remains robust at this sample size when distributions are not severely skewed (Havlicek & Peterson, 1977; Schmidt & Finan, 2018). To further ensure robustness, corresponding non-parametric analyses (Spearman's rho and Mann–Whitney *U* tests) were conducted and yielded largely consistent patterns of significance (see Appendix K). Pearson correlations examined associations among SNS use types, perceived social support, affect, life satisfaction, and shyness (see Table 5). Close-tie SNS use showed small positive associations with positive affect and life satisfaction, and a moderate positive association with perceived social support. Weak-tie and diversionary use were not associated with wellbeing outcomes, although weak-tie use was positively related to perceived social support.

Table 5:

Pearson Correlations Among SNS Use, Wellbeing, Shyness, and Social Support

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Positive Affect (PANAS)	—							
2. Negative Affect (PANAS)	–.43**	—						
3. Satisfaction With Life (SWLS)	.55**	–.62**	—					
4. SNS – Maintain Close-ties	.21*	–.08	.20*	—				
5. SNS – Weaker Ties	.12	.08	.11	.38**	—			
6. SNS – Diversion	–.06	.04	–.02	.14	.35**	—		
7. Shyness	–.52**	.34**	–.31**	–.15	–.01	.14	—	

8. Perceived Social Support	.37**	–.37**	.57**	.32**	.21*	.08	-.28**	—

Independent sample T test's (Table 6) revealed that partnered participants reported higher life satisfaction than single participants, and higher income was associated with greater positive affect, lower negative affect, and higher life satisfaction.

Grouping variable	Outcome	M (SD)	M (SD)	t(df)	p	d
Gender	Positive affect	Male: 33.16 (6.80)	Female: 33.65 (7.22)	-0.37 (116)	.709	-0.07
	Negative affect	Male: 13.93 (5.16)	Female: 13.81 (4.82)	0.13 (117)	.897	0.02
	Life satisfaction	Male: 22.95 (7.41)	Female: 24.23 (6,42)	-1.02 (119)	.308	-0.19
Bereavement	Positive affect	Yes: 32.96 (7.72)	No: 33.71 (6.59)	–0.56 (115)	.575	–0.11
	Negative affect	Yes: 13.87 (5.66)	No: 13.89 (4.51)	–0.02 (116)	.987	–0.003
	Life satisfaction	Yes: 23.85 (7.25)	No: 23.40 (6.73)	0.35 (118)	.727	0.07
Employment status	Positive affect	Working: 33.13 (8.86)	Not working: 33.49 (6.49)	–0.23 (116)	.821	–0.05
	Negative affect	Working: 14.63 (7.56)	Not working: 13.67 (4.09)	0.60 (26.49)	.557	0.19
	Life satisfaction	Working: 21.72 (8.22)	Not working: 24.13 (6.48)	–1.56 (119)	.121	–0.35
Relationship status	Positive affect	Single: 34.42 (6.62)	Partnered: 32.94 (7.16)	1.08 (116)	.284	0.21
	Negative affect	Single: 14.05 (5.25)	Partnered: 13.78 (4.85)	0.28 (117)	.779	0.06
	Life satisfaction	Single: 21.79 (6.67)	Partnered: 24.47 (6.89)	–2.01 (119)	.047	–0.39
Income level	Positive affect	Lower income: 32.79 (7.32)	Higher income: 35.60 (5.36)	–2.13 (51.01)	.038	–0.40
	Negative affect	Lower income: 14.18 (5.39)	Higher income: 12.53 (2.66)	2.15 (85.32)	.035	0.33
	Life satisfaction	Lower income: 22.75 (7.05)	Higher income: 27.08 (5.27)	–3.39 (49.21)	.001	–0.64

Table 6

Independent-samples t-tests examining demographic differences in positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction

Preliminary screening showed that variables assessing frequency and duration of SNS use were extremely skewed, with roughly 75% of participants in the highest-use categories. Predictors with little or no variance cannot contribute meaningfully to regression models because there is insufficient spread to account for differences in the outcome (Field, 2018) and as a result they were excluded from subsequent analysis.

Predictors of Positive Affect

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine predictors of positive affect (see Table 7). In Step 1, income (dichotomised), perceived social support (MSPSS), and shyness were entered, accounting for a significant proportion of variance in positive affect. Perceived social support and shyness were significant predictors, whereas income was not significant. In Step 2, SNS use to maintain close-ties was added to the model but did not significantly increase explained variance. These results suggest that higher perceived social support and lower shyness were associated with greater positive affect, while income and SNS use did not contribute significantly

Table 7

Hierarchal multiple regression for predicting positive affect

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Step 1					
Income	0.90	1.42	.05	0.63	.53
Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	0.14	0.05	.26	3.18	.002
Shyness (RCBS)	-0.32	0.06	-.46	-5.72	< .001
Model 1 summary: $R^2 = .36$, Adj. $R^2 = .34$, $F(3,106) = 19.82$, $p < .001$					
Step 2					
Income	0.84	1.42	.05	0.59	.56
Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	0.13	0.05	.23	2.72	.008
Shyness (RCBS)	-0.32	0.06	-.46	-5.67	< .001
SNS Use: Maintain Close-ties	0.17	0.15	.09	1.12	.26
Model 2 summary: $R^2 = .37$, Adj. $R^2 = .34$, $\Delta R^2 = .008$, F-change$(1,105) = 1.26$, $p = .26$					

Predictors of Life Satisfaction

A hierarchical regression was conducted to examine predictors of life satisfaction (SWLS), with relationship status, shyness, income, perceived social support, and SNS use to maintain close-ties as predictors (see table 8). The overall model was significant explaining 37.2% of the variance in life satisfaction. Adding SNS use in Step 2 did not significantly improve model fit. In the final model, perceived social support and being in a relationship were significant positive predictors of life satisfaction, whereas shyness, income, and SNS use were not.

Table 8

Hierarchal multiple regression predicting Life Satisfaction

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Step 1					
Income	2.71	1.39	.15	1.94	.05
Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	0.27	0.05	.50	5.98	< .001
Shyness (RCBS)	- 0.09	0.06	-.14	-1.69	.09
Relationship Status	0.30	1.24	.02	0.24	.81
Model 1 summary: $R^2 = .37$, Adj. $R^2 = .35$, $F(4,108) = 15.96$, $p < .001$					
Step 2					
Income	2.70	1.40	.15	1.92	.06
Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)	0.27	0.05	.50	5.68	<.001
Shyness (RCBS)	-0.09	0.06	-.14	-1.68	.10
Relationship Status	0.31	1.25	.02	0.25	.806
SNS Use: Maintain Close-ties	0.02	0.15	.01	0.13	.90
Model 2 summary: $R^2 = .37$, Adj. $R^2 = .34$, $\Delta R^2 = .000$, F-change$(1,107) = 0.02$, $p = .90$					

Shyness as a Moderator of SNS Use and Positive Affect

A hierarchical regression examined whether shyness moderated the relationship between SNS use and positive affect (see table 9). In Step 1, shyness, close-tie SNS use, and weak-tie SNS use explained 30.1% of the variance in positive affect. In Step 2, the interaction terms were added, resulting in a non-significant increase in explained variance. Shyness was a significant negative predictor of positive affect in both steps, and the interaction between shyness and weak-tie SNS use was significant such that higher levels of shyness were associated with lower positive affect at higher levels of weak-tie SNS use. No significant interaction was found for close-tie SNS use. These results suggest that higher shyness was associated with lower positive affect, particularly among individuals reporting higher levels of weak-tie SNS use.

Table 9

Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – positive affect

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Step 1: Main Effects					
Close-tie SNS Use	0.25	0.17	.13	1.50	.14
Weak-tie SNS Use	0.17	0.21	.07	0.78	.44
Shyness (RCBS)	- 0.35	0.06	- .51	- 6.17	< .001
Model 1 summary: $R^2 = .30$, Adj. $R^2 = .28$, $F(3,107) = 15.37$, $p < .001$					
Step 2: Interaction Terms Added					
Close-tie SNS Use	0.27	0.17	.14	1.61	.11
Weak-tie SNS Use	0.26	0.21	.11	1.21	.23
Shyness (RCBS)	- 0.31	0.06	- .46	- 5.49	< .001
Shyness x Close-tie SNS Use	0.01	0.02	.032	0.34	.73
Shyness x Weak-tie SNS Use	- 0.04	0.02	- .21	- 2.24	.03
Model 2 summary: $R^2 = .34$, Adj. $R^2 = .31$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, F-change$(2,105) = 2.92$, $p = .06$					

Shyness as a Moderator of SNS Use and Negative Affect

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to test whether shyness moderated the association between SNS use (close and weak-ties) and negative affect (PANAS-N) (see table 10). In Step 1, shyness, close-tie SNS use, and weak-tie SNS use accounted for 6.3% of the variance in negative affect. In Step 2, the interaction terms (shyness × close-tie SNS; shyness × weak-tie SNS) were entered, explaining an additional 4.8% of the variance, with the overall model reaching significance. The interaction between shyness and weak-tie SNS use was significant indicating that shyness moderated the effect of weak-tie SNS use on negative affect. Individuals higher in shyness experienced greater negative affect with increased weak-tie SNS engagement.

Table 10

Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – negative affect

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Step 1: Main Effects					
Weak-tie SNS Use	- 0.09	0.12	- .071	- .071	.48
Close-tie SNS Use	- 0.07	0.09	- .08	- 0.78	.44
Shyness (RCBS)	0.07	0.03	.20	2.13	.04
Model 1 summary: R^2 = .063, Adj. R^2 = .037, F(3, 106) = 2.39, p = .073					
Step 2: Interaction Terms Added					
Weak-tie SNS Use	- 0.08	0.12	- .07	- 0.7	.50
Close-tie SNS Use	- 0.07	0.10	- .08	- 0.75	.46
Shyness (RCBS)	0.06	0.03	.17	1.77	.08
Shyness x Close-tie SNS Use	- 0.01	0.01	- .06	- .06	.53
Shyness x Weak-tie SNS Use	0.03	0.01	.23	2.36	.02
Model 2 summary: R^2 = .11, Adj. R^2 = .07, ΔR^2 = .05, F-change(2, 104) = 2.78, p = .07; overall model F(5, 104) = 2.59, p = .03					

Shyness as a Moderator of SNS Use and Life Satisfaction

A final hierarchical regression tested whether shyness moderated the relationship between SNS use (close and weak-ties) and life satisfaction (see table 11). In Step 1, close-tie SNS use, weak-tie SNS use, and shyness significantly predicted life satisfaction. Adding the interaction terms (shyness × close-tie SNS; shyness × weak-tie SNS) in Step 2 explained an additional 5% of variance, with the overall model remaining significant. Shyness was a significant negative predictor and the shyness × weak-tie SNS interaction was significant.

The shyness × close-tie SNS interaction was not significant. Greater shyness is associated with lower life satisfaction among individuals who more frequently engage with weak-ties online.

Table 11

Hierarchal multiple regression with shyness as a moderator – Life Satisfaction

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Step 1: Main Effects					
Close-tie SNS Use	0.27	0.18	.15	1.49	.14
Weak-tie SNS Use	0.10	0.23	.04	0.42	.67
Shyness (RCBS)	- 0.19	0.06	- .29	- 3.21	.002
Model 1 summary: R^2 .124, Adj. R^2 = .100, F(3,110) = 5.19, p = .002					
Step 2: Interaction Terms Added					
Close-tie SNS Use	0.29	0.18	.16	1.61	.11
Weak-tie SNS Use	0.20	0.23	.09	0.87	.38
Shyness (RCBS)	- 0.16	0.06	- .24	- 2.56	.012
Shyness x Close-tie SNS Use	0.01	0.02	.031	0.30	.77
Shyness x Weak-tie SNS Use	- 0.04	0.02	- .25	- 2.34	.021
Model 2 summary: R^2 = .17, Adj. R^2 = .14, ΔR^2 = .05, F-change(2,108) = 3.24, p = .04; overall model F(5,108) = 4.54, p < .001					

Mediation Analyses

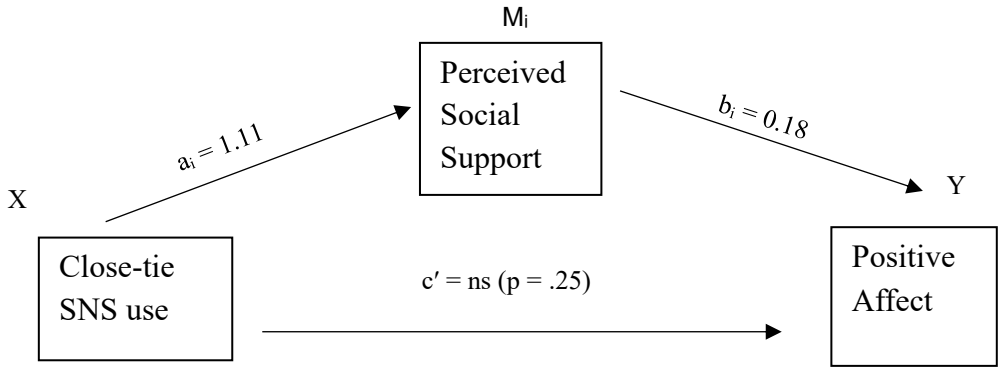
A series of simple mediation analyses (Hayes, 2022) were conducted to examine whether perceived social support (PSS) mediated the relationships between SNS use (close and weak-ties) and indicators of PWB (positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction).

Close-Tie SNS Use

Perceived social support significantly mediated the relationship between close-tie SNS use and all three well-being outcomes. For positive affect, perceived social support emerged as a significant mediator. Close-tie use predicted greater perceived support, $B = 1.11$, $SE = 0.30$, $t(113) = 3.67$, $p < .001$, and perceived support predicted higher positive affect, $B = 0.18$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(112) = 3.58$, $p = .001$ (see figure 2). The indirect effect was significant, $B = 0.20$, Boot$SE = 0.08$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.37], while the direct effect was nonsignificant ($p = .25$), suggesting full mediation. These results indicate that higher close-tie SNS use was associated with higher positive affect indirectly through increased perceived social support.

Figure 2

PSS as a Mediator between Close-tie use and Positive Affect



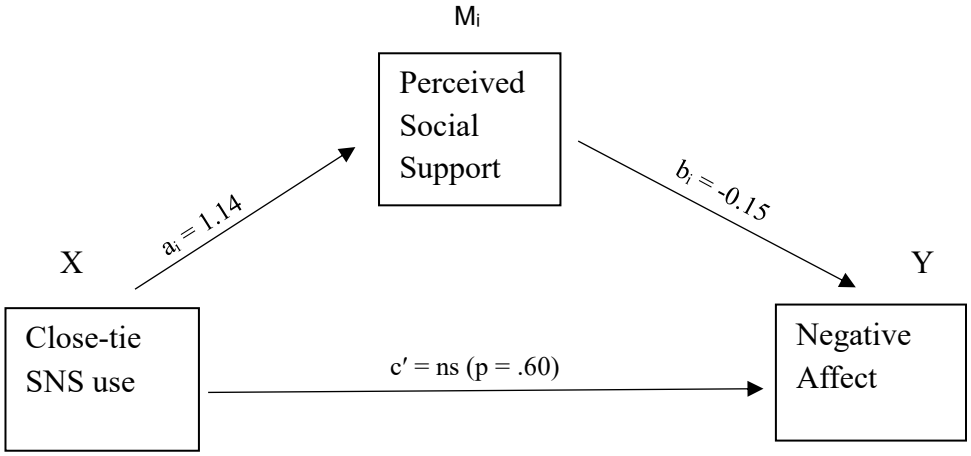
Indirect effect (a_ib_i) = 0.20, BootSE = 0.08, 95% CI [0.06, 0.37]

Direct effect (c′) = ns

PSS predicted lower negative affect, $B = –0.15$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(113) = –4.16$, $p < .001$, while the direct effect of close-tie use on negative affect was nonsignificant ($p = .60$) (see figure 3). The indirect effect was significant, $B = –0.17$, Boot$SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [–0.31, –0.06], indicating full mediation. These results indicate that higher close-tie use was associated with lower negative affect indirectly via higher perceived social support.

Figure 3

PSS as a Mediator between Close Tie Use and Negative Affect



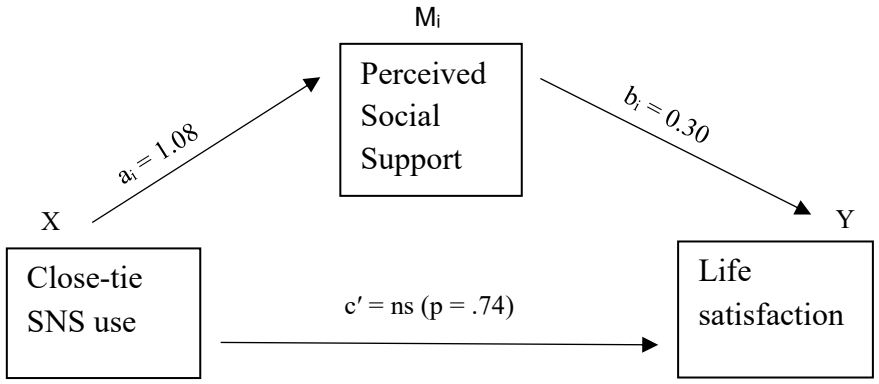
Indirect effect (a_ib_i) = -0.17, BootSE = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.31, -0.06]

Direct effect (c′) = ns

A similar pattern was observed for life satisfaction (see figure 4). Close-tie use significantly predicted perceived support, $B = 1.08$, $SE = 0.30$, $t(116) = 3.59$, $p < .001$, and perceived support predicted higher life satisfaction, $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(115) = 6.94$, $p < .001$. The indirect effect was significant, $B = 0.32$, Boot$SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.56], whereas the direct effect was nonsignificant ($p = .74$), again indicating full mediation. These results indicate that higher close-tie SNS use was associated with greater life satisfaction indirectly through higher perceived social support.

Figure 4

PSS as a Mediator between Close Tie Use and Life Satisfaction



Indirect effect (a_ib_i) = 0.32, BootSE = 0.11, 95% CI [0.11, 0.56]

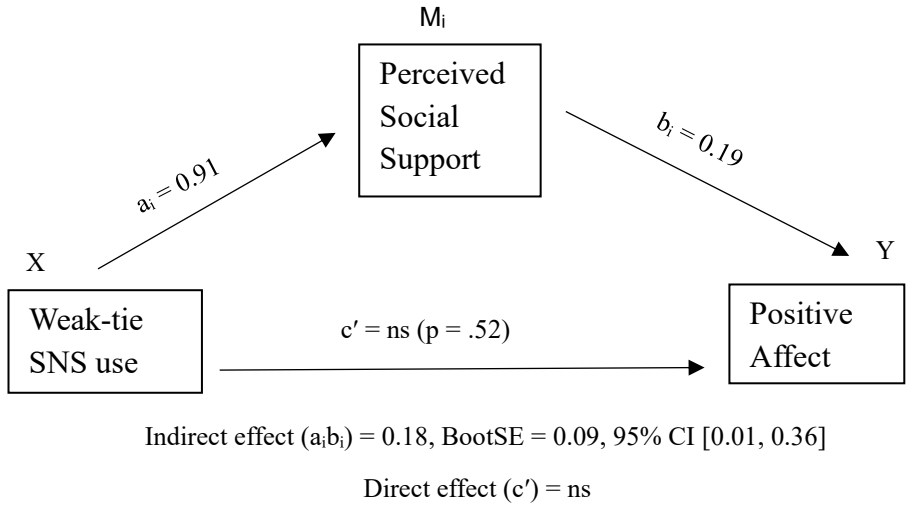
Direct effect (c′) = ns

Weak-Tie SNS Use

Perceived social support also mediated the relationship between weak-tie SNS use and multiple well-being outcomes.For positive affect perceived social support fully mediated the relationship. Weak-tie use predicted greater perceived support, $B = 0.91$, $SE = 0.42$, $t(112) = 2.18$, $p = .032$, which in turn predicted higher positive affect, $B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(111) = 3.93$, $p < .001$ (see figure 5). The indirect effect was significant, $B = 0.18$, Boot$SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.36], while the direct effect was nonsignificant ($p = .52$), indicating full mediation. These results indicate that higher weak-tie SNS use was associated with greater positive affect indirectly through increased perceived social support.

Figure 5

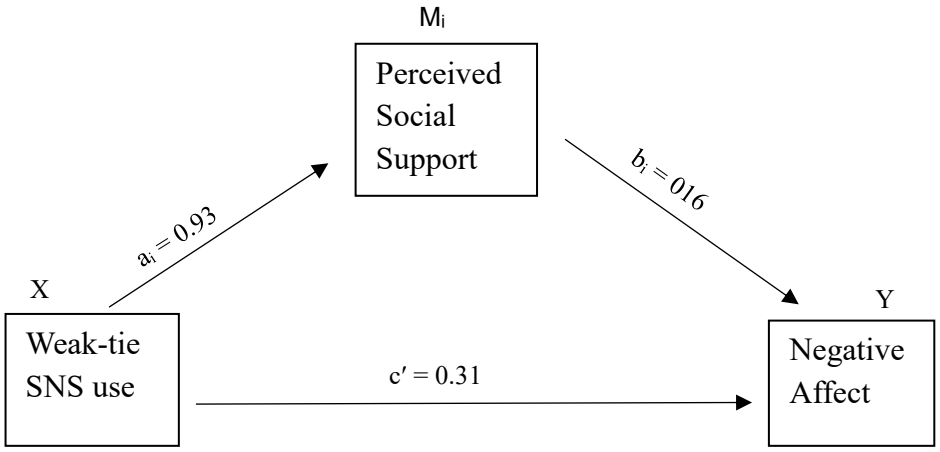
PSS as a Mediator between Weak Tie Use and Positive Affect



For negative affect, both direct and indirect effects were significant. Perceived social support negatively predicted negative affect, $B = –0.16$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(113) = –4.62$, $p < .001$, while weak-tie use remained a positive predictor, $B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(113) = 2.00$, $p = .05$ (see figure 6). The indirect effect was significant, $B = –0.15$, Boot$SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [–0.27, –0.01], indicating partial mediation. These results indicate that higher weak-tie SNS use was associated with lower negative affect indirectly through increased perceived social support.

Figure 6

PSS as a Mediator between Weak Tie Use and Negative Affect



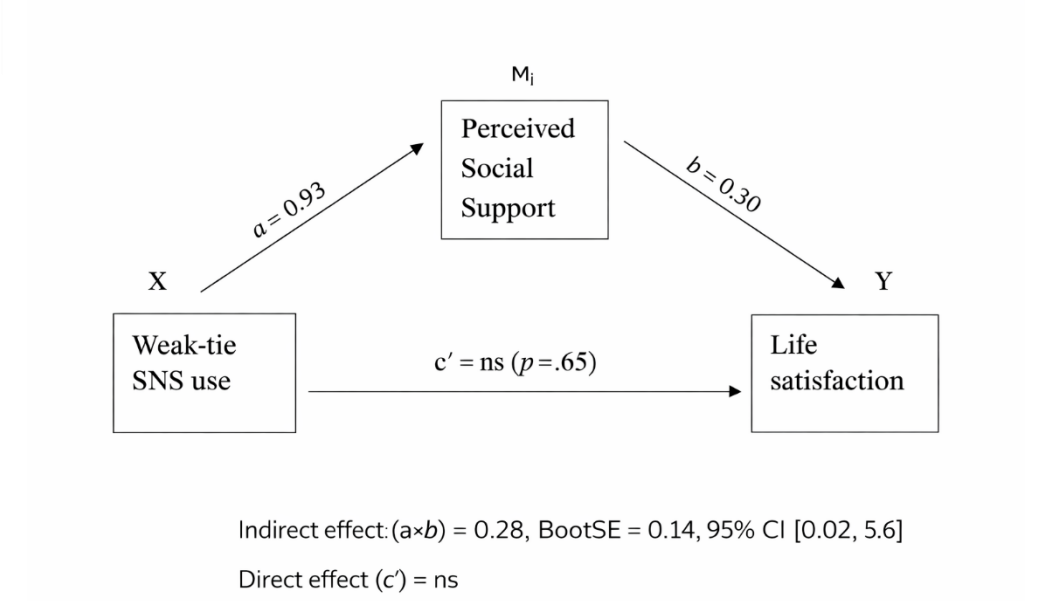
Indirect effect (a_ib_i) = –0.15, BootSE = 0.06, 95% CI [–0.27, –0.01

Direct effect (c′) = 0.31, p = .05

For life satisfaction, perceived social support fully mediated the relationship with weak-tie SNS use. Weak-tie SNS use significantly predicted higher perceived social support, B = 0.93, SE = 0.42, t(115) = 2.24, p = .03. Perceived social support, in turn, was a significant positive predictor of life satisfaction, B = 0.30, SE = 0.04, t(114) = 7.36, p < .001 (see figure 7). The indirect effect was significant, B = 0.28, BootSE = 0.14, 95% CI [0.02, 0.56], whereas the direct effect of weak-tie SNS use on life satisfaction was nonsignificant (p = .65), indicating full mediation. These results suggest that higher weak-tie SNS use was associated with greater life satisfaction indirectly through increased perceived social support.

Figure 7

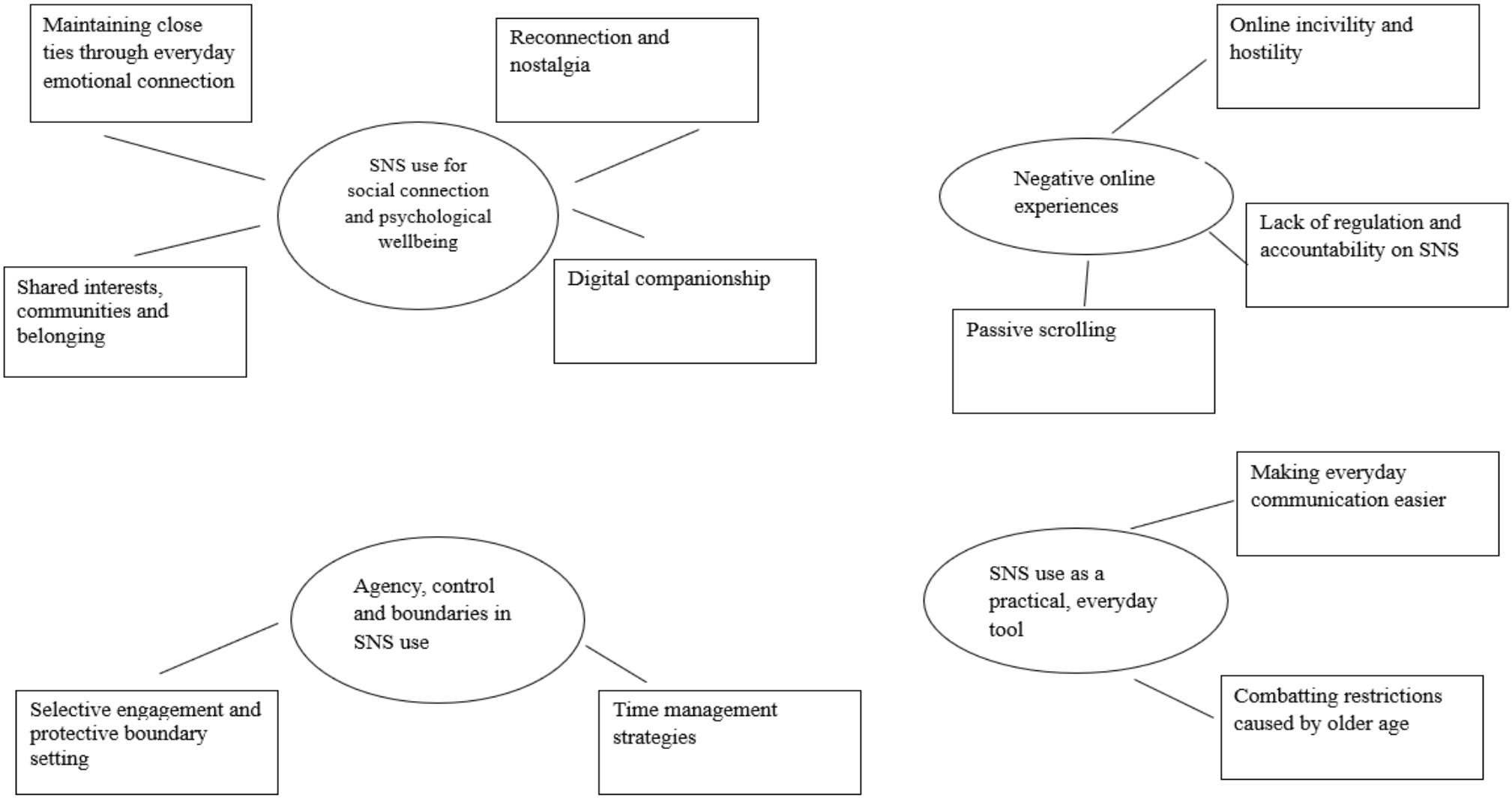
PSS as a Mediator between Weak Use and Life Satisfaction



Qualitative results and discussion

A total of four superordinate themes were generated from the data: 1. SNS use for social connection and psychological wellbeing; 2. Negative online experiences; 3. Agency, control and boundaries in enhancing SNS use; and 4. SNS use as a practical everyday tool. A thematic map of the superordinate and subthemes is outlined in Figure 8. In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are conceptualised as analytic interpretations rather than purely descriptive findings, with interpretation viewed as integral to theme development and presentation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). On this basis, qualitative findings are reported within an integrated results–discussion format, allowing themes to be presented alongside their theoretical interpretation and links to existing literature.

Figure 8 - *Thematic Map*



Theme 1 - SNS use for social connection and psychological wellbeing

Maintaining close-ties through everyday emotional connection

Participants described SNS as central to maintaining close relationships with family and friends, particularly when physical distance limited in-person contact. Platforms such as WhatsApp were used to share photographs, updates, and everyday messages, enabling ongoing involvement in the lives of loved ones. This communication was consistently framed as an extension of existing relationships rather than a substitute for face-to-face interaction, supporting emotional closeness despite geographical separation.

Participants emphasised the importance of staying connected with close others and highlighted how SNS facilitated the sharing of the minutiae of everyday life. As one participant described receiving a photograph of his grandson on his first day of school: *"Now we got a picture this morning of him before he went… you expect these kind of things… like the whole all human life is there kind of, all family life anyways, on WhatsApp" (P1).* Participants described how small, frequent exchanges of photos, messages, and voice notes fostered a sense of continuous connection, with these micro-interactions functioning as simple 'check-ins' that built relational stability over time. This aligns with research on ambient awareness, which suggests that low-effort digital cues help individuals remain attuned to others' everyday lives and reduce feelings of isolation (Levordashka & Utz, 2016).

For some, SNS had become so embedded in their relational lives that it was difficult to imagine maintaining close-ties without it. One participant reflected on the role of SNS in sustaining her relationship with her grandson who lived abroad: *"I can't imagine that you know it would be awful not to be able to see my grandson… I just can't imagine life without social media now" (P11).*

This parallels research with younger adults, which identifies WhatsApp as a key

platform for emotionally meaningful close-tie communication. Users report that its real-time and personalised features, such as synchronous exchanges, voice notes, photos, and other multimedia, foster a sense of closeness and immersion, sometimes to the point of losing track of time. Research also suggests that WhatsApp supports everyday lifelogging, enabling the sharing of small moments and routines that create a sense of "being there" despite physical distance (Karapanos et al., 2016).

SNS may also have facilitated reciprocal emotional support within close relationships. Participants described both giving and receiving empathy, and reassurance through digital communication. *"You feel you're helping them and you feel that they sometimes help you as well… that taps into the psychological element I suppose" (P1).* The asynchronous nature of SNS was perceived as beneficial, providing time to reflect and respond thoughtfully during emotionally sensitive exchanges. As one participant explained: *"It has that advantage of not being in the immediate facility, not being connected in one sense, and being completely detached in one sense, and yet can respond sympathetically." (P11).*

This theme highlights how SNS has the potential to facilitate bidirectional emotional support, strengthening feelings of connection and belonging. Such reciprocal exchanges align with evidence that mutual emotional support enhances wellbeing in later life and that digital communication can expand access to supportive interactions (Quan-Haase et al., 2017). Overall, these accounts illustrate how SNS can be used to support close relationships through everyday emotional connection, combining frequent low-effort interactions with opportunities for more meaningful support that complement offline relationships.

Reconnection and nostalgia

Participants frequently described using SNS to reconnect with people and places from their past, emphasising the nostalgic and emotionally meaningful nature of these interactions.

Community Facebook pages dedicated to childhood hometowns or local areas allowed them to reminisce, view old photographs, and stay connected to places that once held personal significance. For some, this also facilitated the reconnection with long-lost friends, restoring a sense of continuity across life stages. One participant described reconnecting with a childhood friend after finding her family's page online: *"I found a family tree …and I wrote to the person at the end of the site and I said, you know, if this [Friend's name], who was born in 1949…I'd like to get in touch with her. She wrote back the next day and we've been writing ever since and she walked part of the Camino with me." (P2)*

Others described nostalgic responses when viewing posts on local community pages, where old photos evoked vivid memories: *"Ohh I'd be feeling a bit nostalgic… he'll often post photographs from 30 years ago… and I'd say Oh Jesus yeah. I remember him, I remember him."* (P3)

These experiences illustrate how SNS can function as digital repositories of personal history, enabling older adults to revisit emotionally significant relationships and identities. This aligns with Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which posits that as time horizons narrow, emotionally meaningful experiences become increasingly prioritised. Nostalgia has been shown to buffer age-related threats to wellbeing (Hepper et al., 2021), and SNS may provide an accessible medium for such emotionally restorative engagement.

Consistent with prior work on reconnection in midlife (Quinn, 2013), the present findings extend this literature by demonstrating how SNS can allow older adults to reconnect with past ties in ways that reinforce belonging and emotional continuity. Moreover, engagement with memory-sharing features (e.g., photographs, life events, storytelling posts) parallels key elements of reminiscence therapy, which has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms by supporting meaning-making, social connection, and ego integrity in later life

(Hsieh & Wang, 2003). In this sense, SNS may offer informal, everyday contexts in which reminiscence processes occur naturally through shared memory.

Shared interests, communities, and belonging

Participants also used SNS to stay engaged in hobby and interest-based communities, describing these spaces as important sources of information, encouragement and shared identity. Online groups allowed them to follow local activities, exchange updates and share their achievements with others. For many, these interactions provided a sense of community that extended beyond close-ties and local ties, particularly during periods like the COVID-19 pandemic when in-person gatherings were limited. For some older adults, SNS offered a vital space to connect around niche interests that were not shared within their immediate offline community. One participant, for example, described how very few people locally were interested in poetry, yet online groups allowed him to engage with other poets *"There's not many people around about me who are that interested in poetry, but there are people in the world and in Ireland and then in England that you get in touch with and you form that kind of community…but there's a world out there that that I'm in touch with. So yeah, I think it's absolutely brilliant."* (P1)

Others valued sharing knowledge within interest groups, such as Camino de Santiago forums: *"if I see a Camino de Santiago group and I'm in several of those because I've walked the Camino two years ago, and I have something to offer… and when I see people maybe asking a question and I feel like I can add to their, their knowledge, I would. So you know, give them the benefit of my knowledge."* (P2)

Engagement with online hobby- and interest-based communities provided older adults with a purposeful form of social connection that complemented, rather than replaced, close relationships. Participation in such groups has been shown to foster social support, belonging,

identity affirmation, and a sense of usefulness (Ashida & Heaney, 2018; Zhao et al., 2022), aligning with belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and social identity theory, which emphasise the role of meaningful group membership in self-esteem and integration (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Given the mediating role of perceived social support, interest-based SNS communities may be particularly beneficial as they combine task-oriented engagement with relational support. Participants' accounts also highlighted experiences of competence and mastery, as sharing knowledge and offering guidance allowed them to reaffirm expertise developed over the life course, consistent with self-determination theory's emphasis on competence (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Digital companionship

Participants described SNS as an important source of digital companionship, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns when opportunities for in-person contact were limited. Through platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, they were able to stay in touch with friends and family and engage in some of the hobby groups they took part in pre-covid such as bridge club. These online interactions provided comfort and continuity, helping to reduce feelings of loneliness and reinforcing the fact that they were not enduring the Covid restrictions alone. One participant spoke of their experience during covid: *"I would say that it gave some sort of normality, that at least you weren't in total isolation. There were other human beings as disorientated as you were. I think that without it, it would have been horrific." (P6)*

One participant reflected on the changing nature of social interaction, noting a decline in traditional social spaces such as pubs and a shift toward online communication. He acknowledged that, as in-person gatherings have become less common, SNS now plays an increasingly important role in maintaining social contact in contemporary life: *"The*

*conventional ones like the pub and so on. I mean these things are already in decline now, so I guess people are spending more time chatting with each other on social media. And so they are important. I do think they are important" (*P7)

These accounts reflect how SNS provided a sense of companionship and social presence, helping participants feel accompanied despite physical restrictions. This aligns with Quan-Haase et al. (2017), who found that older adults used digital tools to sustain day-to-day companionship through small, regular check-ins and shared updates. As in the present study, digital communication did not replace offline companionship but supplemented and extended it, offering additional touchpoints that helped maintain relational continuity when face-to-face contact was limited (Quan-Hasse et al., 2017).

Theme 2 – Negative online experiences

Online incivility and hostility

Participants described encountering negative experiences in public or weak-tie online spaces, particularly community Facebook pages. These accounts suggest an association between negative online environments and reduced PWB. Participants encountered intolerance, personal attacks, community conflict, and misinformation - all of which elicited disappointment and discomfort. This may help explain why, in the quantitative results, weak-tie SNS use showed no direct association with PWB and, for individuals high in shyness, predicted lower life satisfaction and higher negative affect. Weak-tie spaces are more unpredictable and emotionally unsafe, making them especially challenging for those sensitive to social threat. One participant described receiving aggressive messages: *"And I didn't like that I got a few bad experiences of that from people. You know people cursing at me, swearing and so on. I didn't know who they were at all."* (P7)

Another reflected on how anonymity encourages disinhibited, hurtful behaviour: *"I think when we know the person that we are aware of what we are saying… whereas when it's into the ether there is the possibility to say, give voice to your ugliest thoughts which I find just quite distressing."* (P2)

These qualitative accounts align with Chhatwani et al. (2023), who found that older adults' exposure to negative or emotionally charged content on SNS was associated with higher depressive symptoms particularly for groups more vulnerable to hostile or distressing online environment.

Lack of regulation and accountability on SNS

Participants expressed frustration with what they saw as a lack of regulation and accountability on SNS. Many felt that users could post misinformation or abusive content with little oversight, and that platforms prioritised profit over user safety. This contributed to feelings of distrust and disillusionment, leading some to reduce or stop their SNS use. As one participant noted: *"You can put anything you like on social media and you could probably get away with it yourself, but the company gets away with it because they say they are a platform, they're not a publisher… They make things public and they do so without any consequences." (P7)*

Another participant described being scammed after their Facebook account was hacked, and feeling abandoned by the platform's lack of support: *"All my contacts are potentially going to be defrauded for the next 30 days by thieves and scammers… And they said, well, we're sorry, but that's the rules… I wrote to CEO of Facebook here in Dublin about it and got no response. They really don't care. They're simply out to make money."* (P4)

These experiences align with Lehtinen et al. (2009), who found that older adults often perceive the internet as unsafe, largely due to fears of hacking, data misuse, and accidental

exposure. Similarly some participants in the present study saw digital spaces as poorly governed and lacking meaningful accountability, suggesting that older adults' hesitation around SNS use stems not just from technical challenges, but from broader concerns about inadequate safeguards and platform responsibility.

Passive scrolling

Participants viewed passive scrolling as a largely negative aspect of SNS use. Many described it as pointless, time-wasting, and offering little meaningful benefit compared with direct communication through platforms like WhatsApp. As one participant explained *"I felt that no matter how much I was on, I was missing a lot… So therefore I had to use it more and more and that's wrong… You shouldn't have to devote more and more time to finding out what's going on." (P7)*

These accounts echo Sinha et al. (2023), who argue that features like infinite scroll encourage mindless, repetitive browsing and fuel FOMO (Fear of missing out), contributing to reduced wellbeing. For some participants, this reinforced a preference for more intentional communication: *"Well, I can do without that. If there's any way I want to know what they're doing like I can talk to them directly."* (P7)

Overall, passive scrolling was perceived as emotionally draining and less fulfilling than purposeful, relationship-focused interactions, helping to explain why weak-tie or passive SNS use did not show positive associations with wellbeing in the quantitative results.

Theme 3 - Agency, control and boundaries in SNS use

Selective engagement and protective boundary setting

Participants described selective engagement as a key strategy for maintaining wellbeing online. Many avoided negative or sensational content, steered clear of hostile discussions, and disengaged from platforms they felt were unnecessary or emotionally draining. Facebook was often viewed as a safer, more "mature" space for older adults, while platforms such as Instagram, X, or Snapchat were seen as geared toward younger users. As one participant explained, *"There's also quite a lot of rather unpleasant stuff on some of the other platforms as well. I managed to avoid most of that on Facebook. I think the demographic is older… it looks to me that the demographic on Facebook is more mature adults."* (P4)

Participants also valued the control offered by WhatsApp, particularly the ability to choose who to interact with and which groups to join. This control helped minimise unwanted contact and reduce exposure to negativity: *"Whatsapp, I stuck with that, and I must say I'm very impressed with that… the way in which you can control people you talk to and what groups you join. You know you can't just be attached to a group without your permission."* (P7)

Beyond platform choice, participants described adopting protective communication strategies to safeguard their wellbeing. Many avoided conflict and limited how much they revealed about themselves. Personality shaped these choices, with quieter or more private individuals preferring to "stay under the radar." As one participant explained, *"I don't want to be a public figure. I'd be, as in all my life, I'd like to keep under the radar like."* (P3). This reflects findings by Lehtinen et al. (2009), who reported that older adults often view overt posting as self-promotional, prompting more reserved online behaviour.

For some, limiting visibility functioned explicitly as a protective measure. One participant described restricting her posts to friends only after negative experiences: *"I don't post a lot on Facebook now, and if I do, it's just friends. 'Cause strangers can say some horrible things."* (P10). Together, these accounts suggest that restrained posting and selective

engagement serve as deliberate boundary-setting strategies that help older adults maintain a sense of safety and emotional protection within digital environments.

Time management strategies

Participants also described using time-management strategies to minimise the negative effects of excessive scrolling. Several felt that extended time on platforms, especially Facebook, detracted from their wellbeing and was counterproductive. One participant removed Facebook from her phone to curb habitual use: *"When Facebook was on there I would just go into it and you could spend the rest of the night on Facebook… So I have it on my iPad… and I don't take it up because it's a lot harder to hold in bed."* (P2). Another made a deliberate effort to stop scrolling once it no longer felt beneficial: *"I could sit scrolling on Facebook all day but it's not beneficial to me… I get quickly bored. So then I'll do other things, you know."* (P9).

Older adults' selective engagement, protective communication choices, and time-management strategies can all be understood through Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which argues that people increasingly prioritise emotionally meaningful, low-risk interactions with age. By curating feeds, avoiding conflict, limiting disclosure, or reducing time spent scrolling, participants actively shaped their online environments to maximise positive emotion and minimise exposure to distress. Thus, their SNS use was not indiscriminate but goal-directed and emotionally optimising, consistent with SST (Carstensen, 1992).

Theme 4 - SNS use as a practical everyday tool

Making everyday communication easier

Participants widely described SNS, especially WhatsApp, as a practical tool that streamlined

everyday communication and complemented rather than replaced their existing offline networks. WhatsApp was mainly used to coordinate plans and maintain ongoing contact between in-person meetings. As one participant noted, the platform made group coordination far more efficient than phone calls: *"You're more likely to get an answer… one WhatsApp will get a reply from them all… But if you're trying to arrange something on the telephone with four people…"* (P9).

Participants also observed that digital communication has replaced older forms such as letter-writing and in doing so increased opportunities for contact: *"You don't write cards or letters… those people would probably have fallen off your list… whereas WhatsApp will keep them in touch… increases your communications than what you used to have."* (P10). Importantly, this convenience was framed as an enhancement to, not a substitute for, face-to-face social life: *"We use it as a tool for arranging the meet up in person, you wouldn't be using it instead of an in person meet up."* (P10).

Kim and Fingerman (2022) similarly found that SNS benefits older adults' wellbeing most when used alongside offline interaction rather than in place of it. This supports the present findings that WhatsApp functioned as a practical extension of existing relationships facilitating everyday coordination and contact while leaving the core of social connection rooted in offline life.

Combatting restrictions caused by older age

Some participants described how SNS has become a valuable tool for overcoming age-related barriers to social participation. Physical limitations, mobility issues, and reduced opportunities for in-person interaction made it harder to stay socially engaged, but online platforms provided an accessible way to remain connected with others and involved in community life. One participant described how staying abreast with the poetry community he

is involved with on SNS is important now that he has reduced mobility: *"it's not easy to get around now at my age. OK, I can still move around fairly well but going to Dublin for instance for a poetry reading of an evening, especially in the winter, is not attractive anymore. So, I normally wouldn't do that. So, I don't maybe get out and about quite as much as I did say 10 years ago. So just to keep, if you like my face out there, my name out there that's useful that way." P1*

Another participant explained that being able to communicate through text on WhatsApp was a practical alternative to phone calls, which had become more difficult due to hearing loss: *"It would be an incentive. Do you know? Besides ringing. See with the hearing being bad, ringing now is not the best option." P3*

The ability of SNS to mitigate situational barriers mirrors evidence from broader research. Studies show that online interaction can buffer the social consequences of limited mobility (Quan-Haase et al., 2017) and reduce isolation among homebound older adults (Bradley & Poppen, 2003).

4.5 Overall discussion

The present study examined associations between different types of SNS use and PWB constructs in older adults, as well as the moderating role of shyness and the mediating role of perceived social support. At the bivariate level SNS use for maintaining close-ties was positively associated with indicators of PWB such as positive affect and life satisfaction. SNS use for weak-ties or diversion were not associated with PWB outcomes. Hierarchal regression analysis showed that when controlling for predictors of PWB in older adults (income, relationship status, social support, shyness) the direct effects of SNS use on PWB indicators no longer reached statistical significance. Mediation analysis indicated that SNS use for close-ties and weak-ties predicted higher perceived social support, which in turn predicted higher positive affect and life satisfaction and lower negative affect. This suggests that SNS use is associated with PWB constructs indirectly through strengthening perceptions of social support. Moderation analysis indicated that higher levels of shyness were associated with lower positive affect, lower life satisfaction and higher negative affect. Shyness was a significant moderator of the effects of SNS use for weak-ties on PWB indicators. For individuals higher in shyness greater engagement in weak-tie SNS use predicted lower positive affect, higher negative affect and lower life satisfaction. Shyness did not significantly moderate the relationship between close-tie SNS usage and PWB outcomes.

Quantitative analyses indicated that perceived social support fully mediated the associations between close-tie SNS use and both positive affect and life satisfaction, while for weak-tie SNS use it fully mediated associations with positive affect and partially mediated associations with negative affect. Together, these findings suggest that social connection, rather than SNS use per se, represents a central psychological pathway linking digital engagement to emotional outcomes in later life. This interpretation is reinforced by the

qualitative findings. Participants' accounts of using WhatsApp to sustain emotionally meaningful close relationships through everyday exchanges illustrate how close-tie SNS use directly supports feelings of connection and belonging. Similarly, descriptions of participation in shared-interest communities (e.g., poetry or Camino groups) highlight how weak-tie interactions can provide informational, instrumental, and emotional resources that enhance perceived social support.

This pattern helps clarify the mixed literature on SNS use and social support. While some studies suggest that internet use may detract from offline relationships (Nie & Hillygus, 2002) or that reliance on weak online ties may increase loneliness (Caplan, 2003), other work shows that SNS use can reinforce social ties (Ellison et al., 2007), enhance quality of life (Nam, 2019), and reduce loneliness via perceived social support (Zhang et al., 2020). The present findings align with the latter evidence, while indicating that any apparent benefits of SNS use are contingent on strengthened feelings of supportedness rather than use frequency or network size alone.

Several theoretical frameworks help situate these findings. Need-to-Belong Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) proposes that individuals are motivated to maintain meaningful and secure relationships, reflected in participants' appreciation of everyday emotional touchpoints and being kept "in the loop." Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) further explains how different forms of SNS use generate distinct resources: close-tie exchanges (e.g., WhatsApp) foster bonding capital, while interest-based Facebook groups support bridging capital by providing stimulation, learning, and a sense of mastery. Together, these frameworks highlight how SNSs offer older adults flexible avenues to sustain social worlds when geographical distance, sensory changes, or reduced mobility limit offline interaction.

The indirect associations between weak-tie SNS use and PWB outcomes via perceived social support can be understood through Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

(Carstensen, 2006). Although SST emphasises older adults' prioritisation of emotionally meaningful close relationships, online environments may allow weak-ties to confer distinct psychosocial benefits with minimal effort. Consistent with Granovetter's (1973) strength of weak-ties hypothesis, such connections can provide informational and motivational resources that expand perceived social support. This interpretation is reflected in qualitative accounts describing how participation in online hobby groups offered stimulation, companionship, and a renewed sense of purpose. Together, these findings suggest that weak-tie SNS engagement can generate bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000), complementing rather than contradicting SST's emphasis on emotional selectivity.

However, this pattern was not uniform. Shyness emerged as an important moderator, highlighting how individual differences shape the effects of SNS use on psychological wellbeing. Shyness was associated with lower positive affect and life satisfaction and higher negative affect, indicating its role as a dispositional vulnerability in later life. Moreover, shyness moderated the relationship between weak-tie SNS use and wellbeing: higher weak-tie engagement was associated with lower life satisfaction, reduced positive affect, and higher negative affect among shyer individuals. This pattern contradicts the social compensation hypothesis, which proposes that shy individuals benefit from the reduced social demands of online interaction, and instead aligns with the "rich get richer" hypothesis, whereby more socially confident individuals derive greater benefit from online engagement (Valkenburg et al., 2009). For shyer individuals, weak-tie interactions may heighten self-consciousness, fear of negative evaluation, or discomfort with unpredictable exchanges, thereby undermining wellbeing.

The qualitative findings echoed this pattern. Participants who described themselves as more reserved reported reluctance to post publicly, concerns about appearing boastful, and a preference for private or family-only interactions, often avoiding commenting or engaging in

conflict due to fear of criticism. For these individuals, online communication did not feel protective but instead amplified discomfort. In contrast, the absence of a moderating effect for close-tie SNS use suggests that interactions with trusted contacts provide a psychologically safe context. Negative experiences in weak-tie settings may also reflect online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), whereby others' uninhibited behaviour increases exposure to emotionally harmful interactions. Taken together, these findings help explain the ambivalent relationship between weak-tie SNS use and wellbeing: while such engagement can enhance perceived support, it may also introduce emotional risks, particularly for individuals high in shyness.

Finally, the qualitative data suggest that participants generally possessed strong offline social networks, with many living with spouses, maintaining close family connections, and engaging in active friendship circles. Within this context, SNS use appeared to serve primarily as a complementary rather than compensatory social tool, facilitating efficient communication and coordination rather than substituting for face-to-face contact. Thus, for socially connected older adults, SNS platforms appear to function as pragmatic extensions of existing social worlds rather than sources of new emotional fulfilment.

Limitations

A key limitation concerns sampling bias and its implications for interpretation. Although offline recruitment routes were used, most participants were recruited online, likely favouring older adults who were digitally confident and socially connected. This is reflected in both the quantitative and qualitative findings, which showed high SNS engagement and predominantly positive online experiences. Quantitative screening revealed substantial positive skew in SNS frequency and duration, with approximately 75% of participants clustered in the highest use categories, suggesting that the measures were limited in

sensitivity to differences among moderate, high, and very high users. More broadly, the sample represents a highly 'online' subgroup of older adults and may not be representative of the wider population; CSO data indicate that 12% of adults aged 60–74 and 41% of those aged 75 and over have never used the internet (CSO, 2024).

All qualitative participants reported strong offline social support networks, typically involving spouses, family, and close friends. SNS use was therefore described as supplementing existing relationships rather than compensating for social deficits, with participants emphasising selective, emotionally regulated engagement (e.g., curating content, avoiding conflict, limiting disclosure). While informative, these findings may underrepresent dependency-driven or compensatory SNS use, as such strategies may be less accessible to more socially isolated older adults, for whom SNS use may be more emotionally demanding or comparison-oriented.

In addition, the sample skewed towards younger older adults, with limited representation of those aged over 80, whose SNS experiences may be shaped by distinct barriers related to sensory decline, cognitive load, or digital confidence. Overall, the findings likely reflect a socially resourced and digitally confident subgroup of older adults. Future research would benefit from purposive sampling of more socially isolated, digitally marginalised, and oldest-old individuals to better capture diversity in later-life SNS engagement.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on SNS use and PWB indicators in older adulthood by highlighting the central role of perceived social support. While overall SNS use was not a direct predictor of well-being, its indirect associations through perceived social support underscore the importance of emotionally meaningful online interactions. These

findings align with socioemotional selectivity theory, suggesting that older adults engage with social technologies in ways that prioritise emotional connection and support. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that SNSs function as complementary tools that facilitate communication, maintain relationships, and, for some participants, evoke nostalgia, rather than replacing offline interaction. Overall, the results emphasise that the benefits of SNS in later life depend not on whether it is used, but on how it is used to foster connection.

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Chapter 5: Empirical Paper Supplementary Methodology

5.1 Developing the research topic:

My interest in this research topic was shaped by my experiences during my adult placement, where I worked with individuals navigating a range of age-related challenges. Many of the older adults I supported were dealing with significant changes in their physical health, bereavement and the gradual loss of independence that often accompanies later life. When this research area was presented as one of the potential options for my thesis I was immediately drawn to it because it aligned so closely with the interests I had developed during my adult placement. I became curious about whether SNS platforms could meaningfully supplement offline social interactions especially for individuals with limited mobility or reduced opportunities for face-to-face contact. This led me to think about the different uses of SNS and what elements might be beneficial and which may be harmful, hypothesising that some uses may bolster social connections and others may have negative effects such as negative comparisons with others. In preparation for my ethics application and research proposal I explored the existing research base and it became apparent that significant gaps remained in how researchers conceptualised social networking sites. Many studies treated SNS use as a single, uniform behaviour rather than examining the diverse ways older adults engage with different platforms or distinguishing between the types of activities they undertake online. For these reasons I saw clear value in pursuing a topic that could help explore how older adults might use social networking sites in ways that strengthen their psychological wellbeing.

5.2 Design

A mixed methods design was utilised for this study. Mixed methods research has developed as a methodological approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. This design enables researchers to produce a richer interpretation of research contexts by drawing on the strengths and differences of both approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative component allows for the identification of statistical relationships and general patterns across a broader sample, while the qualitative component offers contextual depth and insight into participants' lived experiences. This combination facilitates a more holistic understanding of complex psychosocial phenomena. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

5.3 Quantitative elements

Quantitative research is a systematic approach that focuses on the analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and examine relationships between variables. It is grounded in the principles of objectivity and statistical analysis and allows researchers to make generalisable inferences about a population based on sample data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative methods are particularly valuable in psychological research for assessing the strength and direction of associations among constructs such as between social networking site (SNS) use and indicators of wellbeing, while controlling for potential confounding factors. The use of standardised instruments enhances reliability and comparability across studies, facilitating replication and cumulative knowledge building (Neuman, 2014). Quantitative designs also enable the testing of theoretical models which contributes to the validation of psychological theories (Bryman, 2016).

The Social Networking Sites–Older Adults measure (Newman et al., 2021) was used

to assess the motives and affect associated with social networking site use among older adults. This scale was specifically designed for this population to address the absence of age-appropriate measures of SNS use. The SNS-OA captures both motivational (e.g., maintaining close and weaker social ties, and diversion) and affective (positive and negative emotional responses) components of SNS engagement, reflecting the multidimensional nature of social media use in later life. Psychometric evaluation has demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) and test–retest reliability over one week was moderately good (ICC = .82), as well as evidence of convergent validity with related constructs such as personality traits and social wellbeing (Newman et al., 2021). Its development involved both expert consultation and direct input from older adults, ensuring strong face and content validity. The SNS-OA therefore provides a reliable and contextually appropriate measure of SNS use in this age group, making it well suited for examining its associations with wellbeing. Psychological wellbeing was assessed using both affective and cognitive components, in line with Diener's (1985) conceptualisation of subjective wellbeing as comprising emotional responses and global life evaluations.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) was used to measure the affective dimension, distinguishing between the experience of positive and negative emotions. The PANAS is a widely validated instrument with strong psychometric properties and is sensitive to variations in affective wellbeing across populations (Crawford & Henry, 2004).

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was employed to capture the cognitive dimension of wellbeing, reflecting individuals' evaluative judgments of their overall life satisfaction. The SWLS is among the most extensively used measures of life satisfaction and has demonstrated excellent reliability, temporal stability, and validity across cultures and age groups, including older adults (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Together, these scales

provide a comprehensive and theoretically grounded assessment of psychological wellbeing, encompassing both emotional experience and cognitive life appraisal.

Participants were recruited through Prolific, an established online research platform designed to facilitate participant sampling. Initial recruitment efforts through community groups and social media channels did not yield sufficient participant numbers, particularly within the target age range of older adults. Prolific was therefore selected as a supplementary recruitment method to achieve the desired sample size and ensure adequate statistical power. The platform has been shown to provide reliable and diverse participant pools, with data quality comparable to or exceeding that obtained through traditional recruitment methods (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Prolific also offers pre-screening tools that allow researchers to target specific demographic characteristics, such as age and geographic location, ensuring that participants met the inclusion criteria. This approach enabled efficient, ethical, and high-quality data collection consistent with current best practices in online psychological research (Peer et al., 2017).

Online surveys facilitate cost-effective data collection and participant convenience which can enhance response rates and data quality (Evans & Mathur, 2018). They also allow participants to complete the survey privately and at their own pace, reducing potential social desirability bias and improving response accuracy (Wright, 2005). In psychological research, online methods have been found to produce psychometrically comparable results to traditional paper-based approaches (Gosling et al., 2004). Thus, the online survey format provided a practical and methodologically robust means of gathering data from older adults who engage with SNSs. It must that noted that while this approach facilitated efficient access to participants, it is recognised that individuals recruited via online platforms may be more familiar with digital technologies than the wider older adult population, which should be considered when interpreting the findings (Remillard et al., 2014).

Mediation and moderation analyses were conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways linking social networking site (SNS) use and psychological wellbeing among older adults. Perceived social connection was examined as a mediator to determine whether SNS use influences wellbeing indirectly through its impact on individuals' sense of social connectedness. This aligns with previous research highlighting social connectedness as a key mechanism through which online interaction can enhance psychological wellbeing (Ellison et al., 2007).

Shyness was tested as a moderator to explore whether the strength of the relationship between SNS use and PWB differs depending on individual differences in social comfort and self-disclosure tendencies. Investigating shyness as a moderator is theoretically justified because shyness is characterised by discomfort with social interaction and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation which are features that are directly relevant to engagement with online social platforms. SNS environments may differentially affect shy individuals by offering reduced immediacy and greater control over self-presentation, while simultaneously exposing them to socially evaluative or unpredictable interactions (Caplan, 2007; Cheek & Buss, 1981).

While quantitative methods allow for the identification of statistical associations between SNS engagement and wellbeing indicators such as affect and life satisfaction, they offer limited insight into the underlying experiences and meanings that shape these relationships. Integrating a qualitative component therefore enabled a deeper exploration of how older adults perceive and interpret their online social interactions, and how these experiences contribute to their sense of wellbeing. This combination of numerical and narrative data provided both breadth and depth, supporting a more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon. Mixed methods research is particularly well suited to topics involving

complex behavioural and psychosocial dimensions, as it enables contextual understanding that would be unattainable through a single-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

5.4 Qualitative elements

A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured interviews, which are well suited to exploring participants' subjective experiences and perspectives in depth. This method enables a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility in exploring emerging topics (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interviews follow a guiding framework of open-ended questions that direct discussion toward key areas of interest while allowing participants to elaborate on issues that hold personal significance (Adams, 2015). Such flexibility facilitates richer and more nuanced data compared to structured formats, as participants can introduce new issues that the interviewer may not have anticipated. (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Given the exploratory focus of the research questions, reflexive thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate qualitative method for this study. Reflexive thematic analysis is a widely used method for systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis is discussed further later in the chapter.

5.6 Ethical approval and anticipated ethical concerns

An ethics application and research proposal was submitted for review to the Clinical Psychology Research Ethics Committee within University College Cork in January 2024. Following the completion of recommended revisions, the revised application was submitted for ethical review in March 2024 and was granted approval in April 2024. Another ethics

amendment was approved in March 2025 to allow the recruitment of participants through Prolific, due to the difficulties in recruiting the required number of participants through community organisations.

Several ethical considerations were anticipated in the design and conduct of this research, particularly as it explored sensitive topics such as loneliness, isolation, negative emotions, and experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that refusal or withdrawal would not affect their access to any services. Both the quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews had the potential to evoke emotional distress. To manage this, participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained electronically, and confidentiality was maintained in accordance with the *Psychological Society of Ireland's Code of Professional Ethics* (PSI, 2019). Because the interviews were conducted online, additional care was taken to establish rapport and monitor signs of discomfort through verbal and non-verbal cues. I used sensitive and supportive language and remained attentive to participants' tone and pace. A plan was made that if a participant appeared distressed, they would be offered the opportunity to pause or discontinue the interview. The participants were also debriefed at the end of the interview and received a list of local support services should they be required. I also completed HSE Safeguarding Adults at Risk of Abuse training and engaged in reflective supervision to ensure participant safety and ethical integrity throughout the study. I also reflected on potential age bias, maintaining a reflective journal and engaging in regular supervision to ensure sensitivity and ethical integrity throughout data collection and analysis.

5.7 Development of the interview schedule

The semi-structured interview schedule was designed to explore older adults' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses related to SNS use. Development of the schedule was informed by findings from previous qualitative research examining SNS use among older adults, which identified key themes such as feelings of connectivity to the outside world (Ballentyne et al., 2010), keeping in touch (Jung et al., 2010) and motivations for using or not using SNS (Lüders & Brandtzaeg, 2014). To ensure the questions were conceptually grounded and methodologically robust, guidance was drawn from established frameworks for developing semi-structured interview guides (Turner, 2010). This process involved identifying key domains aligned with the study aims such as motivations for SNS use, perceived emotional impact, barriers and facilitators to engagement and changes in social connection or mood.

Questions were designed to be open-ended and neutral, encouraging participants to describe their experiences in their own words while allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes. The interview began with broad, open-ended questions before moving on to more specific topics as the interview progressed. Additional questions and prompts were anticipated to arise in response to participants' individual experiences and responses. The language and structure of questions were carefully considered to ensure clarity and accessibility for older adults, avoiding technical jargon. The schedule was reviewed in supervision and subsequently piloted with two adults within the target demographic. The final schedule provided a structured yet adaptable framework that ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on personally meaningful aspects of SNS use and its relevance to their psychological wellbeing. The interview guide was treated as a dynamic tool and refined iteratively throughout data collection. Minor adjustments were made based on emerging insights from early interviews and reflective supervision discussions (Braun & Clark, 2021).

5.8 Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited from the general population aged 65 years and older. This age group was chosen to capture the experiences of community-dwelling older adults rather than those engaged with mental health or clinical services, as the aim was to understand everyday patterns of SNS use and its association with PWB within the broader ageing population. Recruiting from the general population allowed for a more diverse and representative sample, reducing potential bias linked to clinical settings where participants may have distinct psychosocial profiles or additional vulnerabilities.

Initial recruitment took place in January 2025 through gatekeeper organisations that engage with older adults, including Active Retirement Ireland, local Active Retirement Groups, Age Action, Alone, Third Age, parish church newsletters, and online communities such as Facebook and Reddit groups for older adults. Emails and phone calls were made to these organisations to explain the study, and group facilitators who agreed to assist were provided with the study flier and participant information leaflet for distribution among their members. Feedback from some of these groups reported that their members did not use SNS or were hesitant to engage with online research due to concerns about online scam. As a result, responses obtained through these channels were limited and the sample may under-represent older adults who are less digitally engaged or more cautious about online participation.

In consultation with academic and field supervisors, it was subsequently agreed to expand recruitment using the Prolific research platform to improve participant reach. This phase began in May 2025. Individuals completing the quantitative survey were invited to express interest in a follow-up semi-structured interview via a link at the end of the Qualtrics questionnaire. I contacted interested participants directly and provided further information about the study, addressed any questions, and arranged an interview time at their

convenience. The final survey sample consisted of 69 participants recruited through gatekeeper organisations and 89 participants were recruited via Prolific.

5.9 Data analysis

A series of hierarchical multiple regressions, moderation, and mediation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between SNS use, PWB (positive affect, negative affect and satisfaction with life), shyness, and perceived social support. Hierarchical regression was selected because it allows for the assessment of the incremental contribution of theoretically meaningful predictors while controlling for key demographic and psychosocial variables entered in earlier steps (Field, 2018). This approach aligns with recommendations for theory-driven modelling (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019) and permits the evaluation of how additional variables, such as SNS use, contribute to wellbeing outcomes beyond established predictors like perceived social support and shyness.

Moderation analyses were carried out to assess whether the strength or direction of relationships between SNS use and wellbeing varied as a function of shyness. The inclusion of moderation terms followed the conceptual rationale that individual differences in personality characteristics can shape the emotional consequences of online social engagement. Testing for interactions between shyness and different types of SNS use (close- and weak-tie engagement) enabled exploration of whether certain users might experience differential benefits or losses from online interaction patterns.

Mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2022) were employed to test whether perceived social support mediated the relationship between SNS use and wellbeing indicators (positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction). Mediation testing is widely used in social and psychological research to identify underlying mechanisms that explain observed associations (Hayes, 2018).

Overall, this combination of regression-based methods allowed for a comprehensive and theoretically grounded examination of both direct and indirect relationships between SNS use and psychological wellbeing among older

5.10 Reflexive thematic analysis

I analysed the qualitative data using reflexive thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I selected reflexive thematic analysis because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach to identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data, without requiring adherence to a specific epistemological position. This flexibility made it particularly suitable for exploring older adults' experiences of SNS use, an area where participants' subjective perspectives and contextual nuances are central to understanding the phenomenon.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

My first step involved immersing myself in the dataset in order to develop a thorough understanding of the content. I transcribed all interviews verbatim and removed identifying information to ensure confidentiality. I then read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, which allowed me to gain a strong sense of the breadth and depth of the participants' accounts. As Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise, familiarisation is an active, analytic process, during which I begins to notice early patterns or points of interest. During this phase, I engaged with the transcripts in an critical and analytic manner, considering both the meanings conveyed in the accounts and how each participant appeared to interpret and make sense of their own experiences. I recorded my early reflections and observations in a reflexive journal consistent with the reflexive ethos of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In the second phase, I generated initial codes that captured meaningful features of the data relevant to my research questions. I used an inductive approach, allowing codes to emerge from the data rather than applying a pre-existing coding framework. I used the Microsoft Word comment feature to code the transcripts. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, I treated coding as a systematic but flexible process, working through each transcript line by line and applying codes to segments of text that captured something conceptually interesting. I used semantic and latent coding, both coding which focussed on specific meanings and those which I interpreted as having underlying meaning. I coded the data manually, which helped me stay closely connected to the nuances of the material. Throughout this phase, I allowed my coding scheme to evolve revising, combining or expanding codes as my understanding of the data developed. As I became more consistent in my coding approach, I noticed that similar ideas were sometimes labelled inconsistently across transcripts. For instance, various codes such as *"checks Facebook to stay updated," "likes to know what's happening,"* and *"keeps an eye on family activities"* were later unified into the more coherent analytic code *"information monitoring for relational continuity."* This consolidation strengthened interpretative clarity and supported more cohesive theme development. Once I had completed my coding, I organised my initial codes in a Microsoft Word table so that they could be easily reviewed and cross-checked by my academic supervisor. Examples of line-by-line coding and initial codes can be seen in Appendix H.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Once I had generated an initial set of codes, I began grouping these codes into potential themes. This involved examining how different codes might relate to one another and

clustering them into broader conceptual patterns. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as moving from codes to themes, and it required me to begin thinking more interpretatively about the data. On a Microsoft Word document I grouped all the related codes together. I created a preliminary thematic map and examined whether certain codes naturally clustered together. Some codes clearly formed coherent groups, while others did not fit within generated patterns and were either set aside or reconsidered. My aim was not simply to summarise the data but to begin shaping themes that offered meaningful insights about older adults' SNS experiences. At this stage, the themes were provisional and subject to further refinement and included 'Social connections', Emotional effects of SNS use', 'Negative experiences online', and 'Managing SNS use' 'SNS as a practical tool' and 'Miscellaneous'. After this I gathered all the relevant excerpts for each provisional theme on Microsoft Word.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In the fourth phase, I reviewed and refined the provisional themes at two levels: first, I checked whether the coded extracts for each theme formed a coherent pattern, and second, I assessed whether the themes accurately reflected the dataset as a whole. This iterative review process led me to collapse some themes together, divide others into subthemes, and discard those that were not sufficiently supported by the data. As a result of this process I ended up with four main candidate themes. I revised my thematic maps repeatedly to reflect the evolving structure. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach, I recognised that theme development is interpretative rather than mechanical; themes do not simply emerge but are actively constructed. I continued to document my analytic decisions and reflections in my reflexive journal to maintain transparency about how my interpretations were shaped. The second phase required me to read through all transcripts again to make sure the themes accurately represented the key points in the data and were consistent with the

focus of my research questions. These steps resulted in 4 themes identified: SNS Use for Social Connectedness and Psychological Wellbeing; Negative Online Experiences; Agency, Control and Boundaries in SNS use; and SNS Use as a practical everyday tool.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Once I had refined the thematic structure, I moved to defining the essence of each theme. This involved identifying the central organising concept for each theme and clarifying the specific experience or process it captured. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that effective themes should tell a coherent and compelling story, rather than functioning as broad topic headings. I wrote detailed analytic summaries for each theme, examined how they related to one another, and ensured that each theme meaningfully contributed to addressing my research aims. I then assigned concise, informative names to each theme, and developed subthemes to reflect nuances within broader themes. This process helped sharpen the analytic focus of each theme and strengthened coherence across the dataset.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved writing up the analysis in a narrative format supported by illustrative data extracts. I selected quotations that best exemplified the analytic points I wished to convey. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I used the extracts not simply to describe participants' views but to support my interpretative claims. My analytic narrative situated the themes within broader theoretical and empirical contexts, including literature on ageing, digital engagement, and socioemotional selectivity. Throughout this process, I remained mindful of the interpretative nature of reflexive thematic analysis and of my own role in shaping the final account.

5.11 Reflexivity

In this study I adopted a reflexive, interpretivist-pragmatic positionality. Reflexive principles and consideration of my positional standpoint were embedded throughout the analytical process. I engaged in ongoing reflexive practice to recognise and critically evaluate how my assumptions and positionality may have influenced data interpretation and decision making. I identified that my generational position situates me as an outsider to this research topic. As a younger adult in my 30's who grew up during a period in which digital technologies and social networking sites were already embedded in everyday life, my experiences of online communication differ markedly from those of the older adults who participated in this study. In contrast to participants who encountered digital technologies later in life, my familiarity with and routine use of SNSs reflects a different social context. Recognising this generational distinction was important in shaping my reflexive approach, prompting me to remain attentive to assumptions about ease of use and perceived relevance that may not align with older adults' lived experiences. Initially, at the commencement of the research, I thought that my status as a so-called 'digital native', as opposed to a 'digital immigrant' (a person born or brought up before the widespread use of digital technology), situated me as an outsider in this particular aspect. However, on researching these phenomena, I recognised that this concept oversimplifies generational differences and ignores variability within age groups. Many young people lack advanced digital skills, while many older adults demonstrate high levels of digital literacy (Bennett et al., 2008).

This experience made me reflect on my personal preconceptions and experiences that might shape how I approached this research. Reflective bracketing principles were employed to enhance analytic transparency and minimise the influence of preconceptions on data interpretation. Bracketing involves the deliberate identification and suspension of my prior assumptions, experiences and expectations to allow participants' perspectives to emerge more authentically (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Assumptions about older adults' digital abilities and motivations risk reinforcing ageist stereotypes that portray them as technologically inept or uninterested, overlooking their agency and diversity (Neves & Amaro, 2012; Quan-Haase et al., 2018). Treating older adults as a homogenous group similarly obscures variation in digital skills and engagement which are shared by factors such as education, socioeconomic background, health and life stage (Hargittai et al., 2019; Vines et al., 2015). Such deficit-based views can limit understanding of the nuanced ways older adults integrate technology into their lives. To mitigate these biases I adopted an open stance during interviews and made effort to recognise participants as capable technology users and avoided language implying deficits. This aligns with research emphasising older adults as resourceful and adaptable users of technology (Vines et al., 2015).

As someone who regularly uses social networking sites to maintain close relationships, I entered this research with a broadly positive orientation toward SNS use and an interest in its potential psychosocial benefits. Although I was aware from the outset that my generational position and digital familiarity differed from those of the older adults participating in the study, I initially underestimated the extent to which my own assumptions and framing might actively shape the research interaction. It was during the interview phase that this became increasingly apparent.

Despite using open-ended and non-directive questions I noticed that several participants appeared hesitant or apologetic when describing negative or ambivalent experiences of SNS use. On reflection, I came to recognise that this bashfulness likely reflected my own positioning within the interview space. My positive orientation toward SNS use communicated implicitly through the framing of the study and perhaps my body language or affirmations may have conveyed an expectation that SNSs were generally valuable or desirable. Reflecting on this, participants' hesitancy could be understood as a response to the

social dynamics of the interview itself.

Engaging with literature that conceptualises interviews as relational and co-constructed encounters (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) helped me to reframe these moments as data about the research process. This realisation required me to take greater ownership of my role in producing the interactional context, including the subtle ways in which power, age, and perceived expertise may have influenced participants' responses (Finlay, 2002) .

In response, I made more explicit efforts to bracket my assumptions during subsequent interviews. This included openly stating that the research was not intended to promote SNS use or demonstrate its benefits, and that negative or disengaged experiences were equally valuable to the study. I also adapted my interviewing style to more actively normalise critique, using follow-up prompts that legitimised dissatisfaction or avoidance of SNSs. These adjustments were informed by reflection that bracketing is not a one-off methodological step but an ongoing practice that requires responsiveness to the interview context.

Importantly, this reflexive insight also shaped the analytic phase. Recognising that my initial framing may have encouraged more positive or socially acceptable accounts, I paid particular attention to moments of ambivalence within transcripts. Reflexive memo-writing was used to document where my interpretations aligned closely with my own assumptions and to deliberately question these readings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021). I made effort to not treat negative accounts were treated not as marginal, but as central to understanding the complexity of older adults' experiences with SNS use.

Overall, this reflexive process involved confronting the discomfort of recognising my own influence on participants' sense of what was appropriate to disclose. Rather than positioning this influence as fully preventable, I acknowledge it as an integral feature of the research process that required ongoing critical attention. By owning my role in shaping the

interview dynamic and reflecting on how participants' bashfulness emerged within that context, this study adopts a reflexive stance that highlights transparency and ethical responsibility in qualitative research. This approach supports a more nuanced interpretation of the findings, recognising them as co-produced rather than simply elicited.

I was also aware that my positionality and prior assumptions had the potential to shape not only data collection, but also analytic interpretation, particularly in a research area where it is easy to overinterpret cross-sectional associations as evidence of impact or benefit. Throughout analysis, I became increasingly attentive to the possibility that observed relationships between SNS use and psychological wellbeing might reflect pre-existing differences between individuals, rather than the effects of SNS engagement itself. These considerations became an important focus of reflexive engagement during analysis and peer checking and peer debriefing provided a critical space to interrogate my assumptions. Through collaborative discussion with members of the research team, analytic decisions and emerging themes were examined with particular attention to moments where interpretations appeared to imply causal influence or to generalise benefits beyond the sample. These dialogues often involved questioning whether the patterns observed were best understood as outcomes of SNS use, or instead as reflections of who chooses to engage with SNSs, under what circumstances, and with what existing social and psychological resources.

This reflexive process also prompted a substantive shift in my conceptual stance over the course of the research. At the outset I was inclined toward an implicitly intervention-oriented perspective, including ideas around the potential role of SNS use within forms of 'digital social prescribing' However, engagement with the data combined with reflection on methodological limitations and sample characteristics challenged this position. It became increasingly clear that SNS use should not be framed as a universally beneficial activity nor as an intervention to be promoted in the absence of stronger causal evidence. Instead SNS

engagement emerged as one of many possible avenues through which some older adults may support social connection and psychological wellbeing.

Importantly, recognising the legitimacy of non-use or selective disengagement became central to the analytic interpretation. Older adults may choose not to engage with SNSs for a range of valid reasons, including concerns about privacy or preference for offline forms of connection. From this perspective, non-engagement is not indicative of deficit but may reflect values-consistent and adaptive decision-making. Acknowledging this required a conscious move away from deficit-oriented or prescriptive framings of technology use and toward a more pluralistic understanding of wellbeing in later life.

Peer checking and debriefing were therefore used not only as quality assurance mechanisms, but as reflexive tools to temper overinterpretation. By foregrounding the cross-sectional nature of the data, the digitally engaged composition of the sample, and the limits of generalisability, the final analysis avoids positioning SNS use as inherently beneficial or as a target for intervention. Instead, it reflects an evolved stance in which SNSs are understood as context-dependent resources that may support wellbeing for some older adults, while remaining optional and non-essential for others. This reflexive shift was integral to strengthening the ethical grounding and interpretive balance of the analysis.

Keeping a reflective journal was as key component of maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. The journal provided a structured space to record thoughts and evolving interpretations during data collection and analysis. Regular reflection supported critical awareness of how my assumptions, positionality and interactions with participants could influence the research (Berger, 2015). Reflexive journalling also enhanced transparency by documenting decision making and changes in perspective (Ortlipp, 2008). Consistent with Finlay's (2002) view of reflexivity as both self-awareness and methodological rigour, I feel maintaining a reflective journal strengthened the credibility and

integrity of the study Drawing on my supervisors' knowledge and support was instrumental in maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. My academic supervisors were highly supportive and provided methodological and ethical guidance to ensure best practice in the research design. My field supervisor, who specialises in working with older adults in mental health settings, offered practical insight into engaging older participants and ensuring that both the quantitative and qualitative research methods were appropriate.

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Chapter 6: Integrated Discussion

The present research demonstrates that neither older adults nor their SNS practices constitute a homogeneous group, and that associations between SNS engagement and PWB may be contingent on individual, contextual, and relational factors. Across both the empirical study and the systematic review, findings were mixed and all quantitative evidence was cross-sectional. These features substantially limit causal inference and necessitate caution when interpreting SNS use as influencing wellbeing in any directional sense.

In the present empirical study quantitatively SNS use for maintaining close-ties showed positive bivariate associations with psychological wellbeing, including higher positive affect and life satisfaction, whereas SNS use for weak-ties or diversionary purposes showed no such associations. However, when established predictors of wellbeing in later life (income, relationship status, perceived social support, and shyness) were included in hierarchical regression models, the direct effects of SNS use on psychological wellbeing were no longer statistically significant. This suggests that SNS use in isolation is not directly associated with PWB. Instead, mediation analysis revealed that both close-tie and weak-tie SNS use predicted higher perceived social support, which in turn predicted greater positive affect, higher life satisfaction, and lower negative affect. These findings highlight the associations between SNS and PWB are indirect, operating through the enhancement of perceived social connection rather than through SNS use alone.

At the same time, individual differences played a crucial role. Shyness emerged as a significant vulnerability factor: higher shyness was associated with lower positive affect and life satisfaction and higher negative affect overall. Moreover, shyness significantly moderated the effects of weak-tie SNS use on PWB. For shyer individuals, greater engagement with weak-tie networks predicted higher negative affect and lower life satisfaction, whereas close-tie SNS interactions were not subject to this moderation. This indicates that the same SNS

behaviours may be associated with higher PWB for some older adults than others, depending on dispositional characteristics. Weak-tie spaces such as community forums or public Facebook groups may be emotionally taxing for those who are socially inhibited or sensitive to interpersonal evaluation, whereas interactions with trusted close contacts appear to provide a more protective environment.

The reflexive thematic analysis offers an interpretive lens on these findings, suggesting that within this sample participants' experiences of SNS use were understood as being shaped not only by personal characteristics but also by their motivations, goals and self-regulatory strategies. Four overarching themes emerged: SNS use for social connection and psychological wellbeing; Negative online experiences; Agency, control and boundaries; and SNS as a practical everyday tool. Taken together, these themes were interpreted as emphasising that within this sample SNS use in later life was experienced as multifaceted and embedded in a broader ecology of offline relationships and personal histories. Participants described SNS as a way to maintain close relationships, engage in nostalgia, participate in communities, exchange reciprocal emotional support, and experience digital companionship aligning closely with socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2021). At the same time, participants described a range of negative online experiences including exposure to hostility, incivility, misinformation, passive scrolling, and platform design features perceived as addictive. These experiences were most commonly associated with weak-tie or public-facing platforms. Notably, the moderation effect observed in the quantitative analysis may be particularly relevant to socially evaluative risks such as hostility and incivility, which are likely to be experienced as more aversive by individuals higher in shyness (Miller, 1995). In contrast, other negative aspects of SNS use, such as passive scrolling or exposure to misinformation, may reflect more general challenges of online engagement

One potential pattern emerging from both studies is that the association between

active or passive SNS use and PWB among older adults is highly context dependent, shaped not only by individual differences but also by cultural norms, social structures, and the historical moment in which data were collected. In the systematic review the associations of active SNS use with PWB were mixed, with some studies reporting associations with better mood, social connectedness, and life satisfaction, and others finding heightened depression or stress. Rather than reflecting contradictory evidence, these inconsistencies may arise from substantial heterogeneity across studies in terms of platforms examined, measures of SNS use, wellbeing outcomes, samples, and analytic approaches. A cross-cultural perspective offers one possible lens through which to interpret this variability, though it should be considered alongside alternative explanations.

A key contribution of the systematic review was to situate these findings within a global, cultural, and temporal context, demonstrating that SNS use among older adults varies markedly across societies and historical moments. For example, active SNS use in several Chinese studies was associated with reduced depression, enhanced subjective wellbeing, and greater positive affect, with effects frequently mediated by perceived social support, social trust, or self-esteem (Wang & Xu, 2024; Wei et al., 2025; Zhang & Liang, 2023). By contrast, studies conducted in the United States more often reported associations between active SNS use and poorer mental health outcomes, including depressive symptoms (Lewin et al., 2023; Wolfers et al., 2020). These divergent findings suggest that the meaning and consequences of active SNS engagement are not universal, but could potentially be shaped by broader social and cultural frameworks.

Cultural norms rooted in Confucianism further shape the meaning of online interaction in East Asian contexts. The virtue of *xiao* positions older adults as recipients of care and emotional support from adult children, orienting SNS use toward family-based communication and reinforcing high-trust relationships (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). At the same

time, emerging research suggests that peer relationships may play an increasingly important role for older adults in these contexts, offering forms of emotional expression and spontaneity less constrained by familial roles (Mpofu et al., 2024). Active SNS use that facilitates peer-to-peer interaction may therefore confer additional psychological value. However, these interpretations should be approached cautiously, as differences across studies may also reflect variation in platform affordances (e.g., WeChat versus Facebook), sampling strategies, or the operationalisation of SNS use.

Temporal context further complicates interpretation. Studies conducted during China's prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns reported associations between active SNS use and wellbeing, with sharing and messaging on WeChat linked to lower depression and greater connectedness (Ma et al., 2021; Zhang & Liang, 2023). In an environment characterised by restricted mobility and limited opportunities for in-person interaction, SNS-mediated communication may have assumed heightened psychological significance. Conversely, U.S. studies conducted during the same period tended to report negative associations, including heightened depressive symptoms linked to both active and passive use (Chhatwani et al., 2023). In highly individualistic societies, where autonomy and offline social participation are central to identity, reliance on SNSs during lockdown may have intensified feelings of disruption, comparison, or loss of agency. Nonetheless, pandemic-related stressors, differences in media environments, and sample characteristics may also account for these contrasting findings.

One potential explanatory framework invoked in several studies concerns social capital. In the United States, long-term declines in civic participation, neighbourhood cohesion, and institutional trust have been well documented (Putnam, 2000). Against this backdrop, SNS interactions may be experienced as fragmented or inadequate substitutes for richer forms of community engagement. Active posting or messaging may therefore reflect

attempts to compensate for diminished social capital rather than mechanisms that restore it, potentially contributing to emotional strain.

The systematic review also highlighted that SNS-related experiences are unevenly distributed across demographic groups. Racial disparities emerged in studies showing that passive SNS use was associated with increased depressive symptoms among Black older adults but not White older adults, potentially reflecting greater exposure to racialised hostility or discriminatory content online. Gender differences were also evident: in Wang and Xu (2024), forwarding behaviour was associated with wellbeing via both perceived social support and self-esteem for older men, but only via social support for older women. These findings suggest that broader social identities and structural inequalities intersect with digital experiences, further complicating attempts to draw general conclusions about SNS use and wellbeing.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) provides a coherent interpretive framework for understanding the findings of both the empirical study and the systematic review. SST posits that, with advancing age, individuals increasingly prioritise emotionally meaningful interactions and actively regulate their environments to minimise exposure to negative affect (Carstensen, 2021). This theoretical orientation is reflected in the empirical results wherein close-tie SNS use, a form of communication aligned with emotionally significant relationships, was associated with enhanced wellbeing through its positive effect on perceived social support, whereas weak-tie engagement showed more mixed associations, particularly for individuals high in shyness who may find broader, less predictable online contexts incongruent with their emotional regulation goals. The systematic review demonstrates parallel patterns across cultural contexts: with positive associations emerging when SNS use supported emotionally meaningful relationships and negative associations when engagement exposed users to conflictual or evaluative environments. Together, these

findings are consistent with SST's central proposition that the psychological relevance of social interaction in later life depends on its alignment with emotional regulation goals. When considered together, the empirical study and systematic review suggest that SNS use is not uniformly associated with beneficial or harmful outcomes. Its effects may depend on the type of engagement (close-tie vs weak-tie vs passive), the cultural scripts surrounding social relationships, the structural conditions under which data were collected (e.g., pandemic lockdowns), and personal vulnerabilities such as shyness. Older adults' experiences of SNS are shaped not by chronological age alone but by complex interactions between social roles, cultural norms, technological environments, and individual differences. Consequently, SNS use in later life cannot be understood in monolithic terms; instead, its associations with wellbeing are best understood as context-bound and highly variable.

6.3 Implications of findings for clinical practice

The findings of this research suggest that SNS use can represent one avenue through which older adults may experience social connectedness and psychological wellbeing, particularly when engagement supports emotionally meaningful relationships. The results underscore that its psychological relevance depends on how, why, and by whom it is used. From a clinical perspective, this calls for a balanced approach that recognises SNS use as a potential resource for some older adults.

First, the findings indicate that SNS use is most closely associated with wellbeing when it facilitates perceived social support, particularly through communication with trusted close-ties. Importantly, these associations were indirect and embedded within broader relational contexts, suggesting that the psychological value of SNS use lies in how it supports existing or desired forms of connection. Clinicians may therefore find it useful to explore whether and how digital communication features in a client's social world, alongside offline

relationships, community involvement, and personal preferences, rather than focusing on SNS engagement itself as a target of change.

Second, individual differences emerged as important in shaping SNS-related experiences. The moderation effects observed for shyness, alongside evidence that race, gender, and cultural background influence online experiences, highlight that SNS use may be experienced as supportive for some older adults and emotionally taxing for others. Clinically, this reinforces the importance of formulation-led discussions that consider whether particular online environments align with an individual's coping style, emotional regulation strategies, and interpersonal sensitivities. For some clients, selective engagement or avoidance of certain SNS spaces may be adaptive.

Third, the qualitative findings emphasise older adults' agency in shaping their digital environments. Participants described setting boundaries, disengaging from distressing spaces, and using SNSs in ways that aligned with their emotional goals. These patterns resonate with therapeutic emphases in later life on autonomy and emotional regulation. Clinicians may support clients in reflecting on their digital habits to enhance awareness of which forms of engagement feel sustaining and which feel depleting.

Within this context, the findings also point to the potential value of supportive training opportunities for older adults who are interested in using SNSs as part of their social lives. Such initiatives can be framed as enabling informed and confident engagement for those who wish to participate. Training groups might focus on practical skills (e.g., messaging, sharing photos, adjusting privacy settings), while also addressing emotional and relational aspects of SNS use, such as managing boundaries, navigating group interactions, and recognising when online engagement no longer feels beneficial. By emphasising safety and emotional fit, such programmes can support older adults in using SNSs in ways that align with their personal goals and values.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of cultural and structural sensitivity. The systematic review suggests that SNS use could carry different meanings across cultural contexts and during periods of social disruption. For some individuals, SNS use may support continuity of family roles or community participation, while for others it may introduce stressors related to discrimination, comparison or misinformation. Clinicians working with diverse populations may therefore consider how broader social identities and life contexts shape clients' digital experiences and avoid assuming that SNS engagement holds the same relevance or value for all older adults.

Taken together, these findings suggest that SNS use may function as one optional pathway to social connection and wellbeing in later life. Clinical engagement with SNS use is therefore best grounded in exploration and support for informed choice.

6.3 Implications of findings for future research

The findings of this thesis highlight several important directions for future research on SNS use and psychological wellbeing in later life. First, Study 2 demonstrated that SNS use is not a monolithic behaviour but comprises functionally distinct forms close-tie, weak-tie, and diversionary engagement, which are associated with psychological outcomes in meaningfully different ways. Future research should therefore prioritise refined conceptualisations and measurements of SNS use, moving beyond frequency of use. The SNS-OA scale used in Study 2 provides a promising model, and future work should validate similar multidimensional measures across cultural contexts and platforms. Such nuance is crucial given the systematic review's finding that associations attributed to active or passive use were often inconsistent due to broad and heterogeneous operationalisations.

Second, both studies underscore the value of mechanism-focused research, particularly around perceived social support. Study 2 identified perceived social support as a

central psychological pathway linking SNS use to wellbeing, fully mediating the effects of close-tie engagement and some weak-tie outcomes, while partially mediating the association between weak-tie SNS use and negative affect. Future research should test these pathways using longitudinal and experience-sampling designs to establish temporal precedence and better capture the dynamic nature of digital interactions.

Experimental or quasi-experimental designs such as interventions that encourage specific forms of SNS use may also clarify causality by determining whether increases in perceived support result directly from digital behaviour or reflect broader social dispositions. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, the direction of these associations remains uncertain. Future research would benefit from longitudinal, diary-based, or experience-sampling designs that can better capture the temporal sequencing of SNS use, perceived support, and PWB. Such approaches would help clarify whether SNS engagement contributes to changes in perceived social support over time, or whether individuals with higher baseline support are simply more likely to engage digitally. Carefully designed quasi-experimental or naturalistic studies may also help disentangle these processes,

Third, the findings point to the importance of individual differences as moderators of SNS effects. Shyness significantly amplified the negative emotional consequences of weak-tie SNS use in Study 2, mirroring the systematic review's scope of differential outcomes potentially based on race, gender, and cultural background. Future research should therefore adopt a moderated–mediation framework, examining how dispositional traits (e.g., shyness, neuroticism, social anxiety), sociodemographic factors (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status), and digital competencies interact with different types of SNS use. Person-centred analytic techniques, such as latent profile analysis, may help identify distinct subgroups of older users who engage with SNS in qualitatively different ways and experience correspondingly different psychological outcomes.

Fourth, the systematic review revealed that studies examining active and passive SNS use and its associations with PWB were limited. Substantial cross-cultural variability in the effects of SNS use, suggesting that cultural norms and sociopolitical contexts may shape both the meaning and consequences of digital interaction. Future comparative research should examine how collectivistic versus individualistic orientations, intergenerational expectations, and cultural norms surrounding emotional expression influence older adults' online behaviour. Integrating frameworks such as Socioemotional Selectivity Theory with culturally grounded theories may yield a more comprehensive understanding of how older adults navigate digital spaces across diverse societies.

6.4 References

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Appendix A:

CASP Checklist

CASP Cross Sectional Studies Checklist	Lewin et al. 2023	Chhatwani et al. 2023	Wang & Xu 2024	Zhang & Liang 2023	Kim & Shen 2019	Wei et al. 2025	Simons et al. 2021	Ma et al. 2021	Wolfers et al. 2020	Wang et al. 2018	Evans et al. 2023
Did the study address a clearly focused issue?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Did the authors use an appropriate method to answer their question?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Were the subjects recruited in an acceptable way?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Were the measures accurately measured to reduce bias?	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No

Were the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Did the study have enough participants to minimise the play of chance?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How are the results presented and what is the main result?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can the results be applied to the local population?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

How valuable is the research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Score Quality rating	91% Good	82% Good	91% Good	82% Good	82% Good	82% Good	91% Good	91% Good	82% Good	91% Good	91% Good

Appendix B

Ethics Approval by UCC Clinical Psychology Research Ethics Committee

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Coláiste na nEalaíon, an Léinn Cheiltigh agus na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta
College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences

Scoil an Síceolaíochta Feidhmí
School of Applied Psychology

University College Cork,
Cork, Ireland.

T +353 (0)21 490 4551 / 4552
E infoapsych@ucc.ie
http://www.ucc.ie/en/apsych/

26th January 2024

Dear Aoife,

Clinical Psychology Research and Ethics Meeting 19.01.2024

Thank you for presenting the above research proposal to the Research and Ethics panel.

Based on your written proposal and further clarification and discussion during the meeting, the decision of the panel was:

- **Revise & Resubmit**
  In formulating a revised submission please attend to the following issues raised by both reviewers on the current proposal:

This is potentially a useful study, but needs significant revisions. I think greater consideration needs to be given to defining the parameters of a social networking site. The concept hasn't been clearly introduced. A few social media platforms are listed but it isn't clear what breadth of platform is included in the study (Is whatsapp included? Linkedin? Adding comments to content on youtube or sites such as thejournal.ie?).

Research questions on social network usage are very much limited by measure chosen

(which only looks at functions served by social network usage).

Dr Chris McCusker
Head of School of Applied Psychology

Coláiste na hOllscolie Corcaigh
University College Cork

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Aoife O'Carroll

Ethics resubmission

7 messages

Nora Hennessy <NHennessy@ucc.ie> Tue, Apr 16, 2024 at 8:02 AM
To: Aoife O'Carroll <119226033@umail.ucc.ie>

Dear Aoife,

Many thanks for your resubmission. This is approved subject to a the minor revisions outlined as comments in the attached document and those listed below:

- The risk assessment on page 40 needs to be more nuanced. It currently reads as an either/or re family or emergency services. It reads as though family being called would negate the need for any input from emergency services. Risk assessment also needs details of how lower risk would be managed.

- Ensure consistency between details of proposal and info leaflet. In the proposal, it is noted that the study will broadly define social media platforms and whatsapp, email, and other less traditional forms of social media are listed. However, this is different from the information sheet where only more traditional social media platforms are listed.

- Same lack of consistency issue in Echo advert. Also proof read this advert for typo's.

- Re responding to emails from individuals in distress, I think a week is too long. Can reply be more responsive? It is helpful to reference the HSE guidance document on risk. The practice of acknowledging what has been said in the email as well as effectively signposting to services is also helpful. However, I don't think it's helpful to overly focus on a script for responding as this may not fit the email. Can the option of

consulting with a qualified clinician in the event of a complex email be included?

All the best,

Nora

Nora Hennessy | Programme Administrator, DCLIN Psychology| School of Applied Psychology|
Distillery House, North Mall Campus |UCC |Ph: 021 490 4512 | 086 066 1850 |
nhennessy@ucc.ie

https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/academic/appliedpsychology/dclin/newsletter/Newsletter20Nov2023.pdf

Appendix C:
SNS use and PWB in Older Adults Study

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Information Sheet

For participants of the study:

'The effects of social network usage on the Psychological Wellbeing of older adults'

Purpose of the Study:
This study aims to better understand older adults' experiences of using social networking sites to communicate with the people in their lives or for forming new connections with people online. This study seeks to explore to what extent if any using these sites affect a person's emotional health and overall satisfaction with life. It is also interested in exploring whether *how* we use social networking sites (for example do we use it to communicate with close friends or family or to people we do not know) has an effect on our wellbeing. A social networking site can be defined as an internet-based website where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people. This may include traditional social media platforms such as facebook and instragram, content creation sites such as X, instant messaging services such as whatsapp and email services. This study will take a broad interpretation of what constitutes a social networking site and include any web based platform that allows communication and sharing of content with others.

Why is the study being conducted?
Social networking sites can allow people to maintain social contact with their friends and loved ones. Results of this study may guide implementation of training programmes to make social network usage more accessible.

Why have I been invited to participate?
You have been invited to participate because you are aged 65+.

What will the study involve?
The study involves collecting data from older adults aged 65+, on a number of questions about their experiences of using social networking sites and their Psychological Wellbeing. If you choose to take part, you will be asked to complete a series of online questionnaires on Psychological Wellbeing, social network usage and social support. This will take about 10-15 minutes.

Further qualitative study:
At the end of the online questionnaire you will be presented with information about a further interview that you have the option of taking part in in addition to this survey. You will be given contact details of the lead researcher of this study, Aoife O' Carroll who you can contact if you are interested in taking part in this aspect of the study. This interview will involve questions

about your experiences of using social networking sites. Interviews will be audio-recorded and are expected to take about 45 minutes to complete.

Do I have to take part?
No, participation is voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form. You have the option of withdrawing from the study, even if you have agreed to participate.

What will happen with the information I provide?
All of the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous, and will be available only to myself (the researcher) and my supervisor. No identifying data linking you with you survey responses will be collected. The data will be stored for 10 years on the researcher's UCC OneDrive a secure file sharing and transfer service . Your personal data will be processed and handled in accordance with European legislation, including the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679.

What happens if I decide to take part but then change my mind?
Your decision to take part in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part if you do not want to. If at any point during completing the questionnaires you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to discontinue. Please be mindful that because survey submissions are anonymised that it is not possible to withdraw your data after submission of the survey, therefore the right to withdraw lapses on submission of data.

What happens if I complete the questionnaire and then change my mind?
As the Qualtrics e-survey is completely anonymous and therefore the data is not identifiable and subsequently non-retrievable, participants have the right to withdraw up until the point they submit their data.

What will happen to the results? The information you provide will contribute to a research report which will be submitted by the lead researcher to meet criteria for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology in UCC. The research team also hope to submit the report to a research journal and for presentation at conferences. We also hope to talk about the study's findings at conferences and to publish the results in a journal article.

What are the risks of this study?
There are few risks associated with this study, however as the survey questions touch on emotional wellbeing, loneliness and isolation there is the chance that some people may find answering the questions distressing. There are details for support organisations at the end of this form.

Who has reviewed this study?
Approval has been given by the UCC Clinical Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Support organisations:

ALONE
National support and referral line for older people.
Phone 0818 222 024, 8am to 8pm every day
alone.ie

Samaritans

The Samaritans telephone service is available 24 hours a day for confidential, non-judgmental support.
Freephone 116123
Samaritans.ie

Text About It
Text About It is a free, 24/7 service, providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for your mental health and emotional wellbeing.
Free-text HELLO to 50808 for an anonymous chat with a trained volunteer, any time.
textaboutit.ie

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact:

Aoife O' Carroll (Trainee Clinical Psychologist, UCC): 119226033@umail.ucc.ie
Mike Murphy (Research Superivsor), UCC: mike.murphy@ucc.ie

Appendix D:
SNS user and Psychological Wellbeing Online Survey

If you agree to take part in the study, please fill out the consent form on the next page.

Q2
Consent Form By accepting and clicking this consent form you understand and agree that: The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to you in writing on the information sheet You understand that you are participating voluntarily You understand that you must be aged 65+ to participate in the study You understand that you can withdraw from the study up until the point where you submit the data. As the data is anonymised it cannot be withdrawn after this point. You understand that your anonymized data will be stored in the UCC data storage facility for 10 years. Any information you provide will contribute to a written thesis and may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations

Q3 Please select one of the following

○ I consent to participate in the study (1)

○ I do not consent to participate in the study (2)

Page Break

Q45 Please enter your Prolific ID

_____

Q9 Gender:

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Non-binary (3)
- ○ Other (Please specify) (4)
  _____
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q7 This survey is interested in the association between age, social network usage and psychological wellbeing. Please select your **age** from the drop down menu below:

▼ 65 (4) ... 110 (93)

Q44 If you have trouble selecting your **age** from the drop down menu please write it in the box below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q10 What is your marital status:

- ○ Single, never married (1)
- ○ Married or domestic partnership (2)
- ○ Widowed (3)
- ○ Divorced (4)
- ○ Separated (5)

Q11 Have you had a bereavement of a partner/spouse/close family member or friend in the past 3 years?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Q12 Employment status:

- ○ Employed for wages (1)
- ○ Self-Employed (2)
- ○ Retired (3)
- ○ Unemployed (4)
- ○ Homemaker (5)

Q13 How healthy would you consider yourself on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very unhealthy and 5 being very healthy?

- 1 - Very unhealthy (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 - Very healthy (5)

Q14 Do you smoke tobacco/cigarettes?

- I currently smoke (1)
- I do not smoke (2)
- I used to smoke but have quit (3)

Q15 How often has poor sleep troubled you in the past month?

- Always (1)
- Very often (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q16 Please select which category of net annual income (total income minus tax) your household falls under:

- ○ €0 to €16,558 (1)
- ○ €16,559 to €55,149 (2)
- ○ €55,150 to €100,000 (3)
- ○ >€100,000 (4)

Q17 Do you find it difficult to carry out any activities of daily living relating to toileting, personal hygiene, dressing, eating or getting around:

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

End of Block: Information Sheet

Start of Block: Block 2

Q18 **Social Network Usage** How many days per week do you use social networking sites?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- 4 (4)
- 5 (5)
- 6 (6)
- 7 (7)

Q19 Time spent daily using social networking sites:

- Little or no time (1)
- 1-3 hours (2)
- 3-7 hours (3)
- 7 hours or more (4)

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 4

Q20 **In general** indicate the extent to which you have felt this way over the past week:

	Very slightly or not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Extremely (5)
Interested (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Distressed (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Excited (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Upset (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Strong (5)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Block 8

Q32 **In general** indicate the extent to which you have felt this way over the past week:

	Very slightly or not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Extremely (5)
Guilty (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Scared (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Hostile (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Enthusiastic (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Proud (5)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 8

Start of Block: Block 9

Q33 **In general** indicate the extent to which you have felt this way over the past week:

	Very slightly or not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Extremely (5)
Irritable (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Alert (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Ashamed (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Inspired (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Nervous (5)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 9

Start of Block: Block 10

Q34 **In general** indicate the extent to which you have felt this way over the past week:

	Very slightly or not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Quite a bit (4)	Extremely (5)
Determined (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Attentive (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Jittery (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Active (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Afraid (5)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 10

Start of Block: Block 5

Q22 Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by selecting the appropriate response.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Slightly disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Slightly agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
In most ways my life is close to my ideal (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The conditions of my life are excellent (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am satisfied with my life (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
If I could live my life over I would change almost nothing (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Block 7

Q23 Please read the statements below that relate to social media usage and select the appropriate option for your own usage **I use social media...**

	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Very much (4)
To look at family or good friends' photos (1)	○	○	○	○
To share my news with family and good friends (2)	○	○	○	○
To know what family or good friends are up to (3)	○	○	○	○
To share things (e.g. articles, photos) with family or good friends (4)	○	○	○	○
To keep in touch with family or good friends (5)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 7

Start of Block: Block 12

Q36 Please read the statements below that relate to social media usage and select the appropriate option for your own usage **I use social media...**

	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Very much (4)
To communicate with people I haven't seen in a while (1)	○	○	○	○
To stay connected with current or former work colleagues (2)	○	○	○	○
To reconnect with people I've lost contact with (3)	○	○	○	○
To browse around people I used to know (4)	○	○	○	○
To check out the posts (e.g. photos...) of people I used to know (5)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 12

Start of Block: Block 13

Q37 Please read the statements below that relate to social media usage and select the appropriate option for your own usage **I use social media...**

	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Very much (4)
To pass the time when I'm bored (1)	○	○	○	○
To relax and unwind (2)	○	○	○	○
To keep myself occupied (3)	○	○	○	○
To update my profile and/or status (4)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 13

Start of Block: Block 14

Q38 Please read the statements below that relate to how social media makes you **feel** and select the appropriate response

	Not at all (1)	A little (2)	Moderately (3)	Very much (4)
I feel alert when I use social media (1)	○	○	○	○
I feel attentive when I use social media (2)	○	○	○	○
I feel enriched when I use social media (3)	○	○	○	○
I feel irritated when I use social media (4)	○	○	○	○
I feel ambivalent when I use social media (5)	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 14

Start of Block: Block 8

Q24 Please read each item carefully and decide to what extent it is characteristic of your feelings and behaviour **in general**

	Very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree (1)	Un-characteristic (2)	Neutral (3)	Characteristic (4)	Very characteristic or true, strongly agree (5)
I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I am socially somewhat awkward (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I do not find it difficult to ask other people for information (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I am often uncomfortable at parties and other social functions (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 8

Start of Block: Block 11

Q35 Please read each item carefully and decide to what extent it is characteristic of your feelings and behaviour **in general**

	Very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree (1)	Un-characteristic (2)	Neutral (3)	Characteristic (4)	Very characteristic or true, strongly agree (5)
When in a group of people, I have trouble thinking of the right things to talk about (1)	○	○	○	○	○
It does not take me long to overcome my shyness in new situations (2)	○	○	○	○	○
It is hard for me to act natural when I am meeting new people (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel nervous when speaking to someone in authority (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 11

Start of Block: Block 15

Q40 Please read each item carefully and decide to what extent it is characteristic of your feelings and behaviour **in general**

	Very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree (1)	Un-characteristic (2)	Neutral (3)	Characteristic (4)	Very characteristic or true, strongly agree (5)
I have no doubts about my social competence (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I have trouble looking someone right in the eye (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel inhibited in social situations (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I do not find it hard to talk to strangers (4)	○	○	○	○	○
I am more shy with members of the opposite sex (5)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 15

Start of Block: Block 9

Q25 Please read each statement carefully and indicate how you feel about each one:

	Very strongly disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (2)	Mildly disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Mildly agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)	Very strongly agree (7)
There is a special person who is around when I am in need (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My family really tries to help me (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I get the emotional help and support I need from my family (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 9

Start of Block: Block 16

Q41 Please read each statement carefully and indicate how you feel about each one:

	Very strongly disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (2)	Mildly disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Mildly agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)	Very strongly agree (7)
I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My friends really try to help me (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can count on my friends when things go wrong (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can talk about my problems with my family (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Block 16

Start of Block: Block 17

Q42 Please read each statement carefully and indicate how you feel about each one:

	Very strongly disagree (1)	Strongly disagree (2)	Mildly disagree (3)	Neutral (4)	Mildly agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)	Very strongly agree (7)
I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My family is willing to help me make decisions (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can talk about my problems with my friends (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Q46 Thank you for participating. **Your Prolific completion code is: C10PY1L9** If you need any support following your participation please reach out to your local support and mental health agency. In addition, if needed free national helplines or text services such as Pieta, Samaritans (Ireland) and Text About It, may be of support to you: Samaritans (Ireland) provides a free emotional support listening service by phone, 24/7. Samaritans help everyone in Ireland who may be struggling or looking for support with any issue, such as mental health difficulties or relationships, school or work issues. To contact Samaritans (Ireland) call 116 123. Pieta provides 24/7, free, and confidential support and information for everyone in Ireland supporting callers experiencing distress, suicidal thoughts and self-harm. To contact Pieta call 1800 247 247 or Text HELP to 51444. Text About It, is funded by the HSE and a free messaging service. From calming chats to immediate support during a mental health or personal crisis – big or small, Text About It, is an anonymous service that provides a safe space. Text HELLO to 50808 to start a conversation

End of Block: Block 17

Start of Block: Block 8

Q31
Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study.
Invitation to take part in Qualitative Interview The research team are looking for participants to take part in a qualitative interview as part of this study which aims to explore experiences of using social networking sites. Interviews are expected to take approximately 45 minutes.

Email Collection: If you are interested in taking part in an interview we would like to **contact you again in 4 weeks.**

If you agree to us contacting you, please **follow this link** (click to follow, or copy and paste into your browser) to enter your email address:

https://ucc.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/previewId/2bba8527-7523-441b-bd6a-cfb512e1f796/SV_8ih0Eu4YJVjOTZk?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current

Your contact details will be stored separately from your responses; **they will not be linked.**

Alternatively you can contact the researcher by email:

Aoife O' Carroll (Trainee Clinical Psychologist, UCC): 119226033@umail.ucc.ie

If you need any support following your participation please reach out to your local support and mental health agency. In addition, if needed free national helplines or text services such as Pieta, Samaritans (Ireland) and Text About It, may be of support to you: Samaritans (Ireland) provides a free emotional support listening service by phone, 24/7. Samaritans help everyone in Ireland who may be struggling or looking for support with any issue, such as mental health difficulties or relationships, school or work issues. To contact Samaritans (Ireland) call 116 123. Pieta provides 24/7, free, and confidential support and information for everyone in Ireland supporting callers experiencing distress, suicidal thoughts and self-harm. To contact Pieta call 1800 247 247 or Text HELP to 51444. Text About It, is funded by the HSE and a free messaging service. From calming chats to immediate support during a mental health or personal crisis – big or small, Text About It, is an anonymous service that provides a safe space. Text HELLO to 50808 to start a conversation

End of Block: Block 8

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Appendix E:

Information Sheet for Qualitative Interviews

Information Sheet

For participants of the study:

'The effects of social network usage on the Psychological Wellbeing of older adults'

Purpose of the Study: This study aims to better understand older adults' experiences of using social networking sites to communicate with the people in their lives or for forming new connections with people online. This study seeks to explore to what extent if any using these sites affect a person's Psychological wellbeing, i.e emotional health and satisfaction with life. It is also interested in exploring whether *how* we use social networking sites has an effect on our wellbeing, for example do we use it to communicate with close friends or family or to people we do not know. A social networking site can be defined as an internet based website where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people. This may include traditional social media platforms such as facebook and instragram, content creation sites such as X (Twitter), instant messaging services such as whatsapp and email services. This study will take a broad interpretation of what constitutes a social networking site and include any web based platform that allows communication and sharing of content with others.

Why is the study being conducted? Social networking sites can allow people to maintain social contact with their friends and loved ones. Results of this study may guide implementation of training programmes to make social network usage more accessible.

Why have I been invited to participate? You have been invited to participate because you are aged 65+.

What will the study involve? The study involves collecting data from older adults aged 65+, on a number of questions about their experiences of using social networking sites and their Psychological Wellbeing, such as what sites you use, how often you use them, what you use them for and how you feel when using them. If you choose to take part the interview will be

carried out by Aoife O' Carroll, a Trainee Clinical Psychologist with University College Cork and will take approximately 45 minutes. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no obligation to participate. If you agree to take part in the interview and change your mind, you can choose to withdraw your details at any time in the subsequent two weeks.

Do I have to take part? No, participation is voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form. You have the option of withdrawing from the study, even if you have agreed to participate.

What will happen with the information I provide?

All of the information you provide will be kept confidential and anonymous, and will be available only to myself (the researcher) and my supervisors. The only exception to this is if the participant indicates that they are a threat to themselves or others, in which case the researcher must notify someone who can keep the person safe or notify the person about who the threat referred to. In the event of this happening it will be discussed with the participant. We are collecting data for research purposes only, so we gather only a minimum of personal data (name and email address or telephone number) to record consent, and it will be stored securely and separately from the interview data collected. The data will be stored for 10 years. Your personal data will be processed and handled in accordance with European legislation, including the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. The information you provide may contribute to research publications and/or conference presentations and a dissertation submission and no identifying information will ever be used.

What will happen to the results? The information you provide will contribute to a research report which will be submitted by the lead researcher to meet criteria for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology in UCC. The research team also hope to submit the report to a research journal and for presentation at conferences. We also hope to talk about the study's findings at conferences and to publish the results in a journal article.

What are the risks of this study?

There are few risks associated with this study, however as the interview questions may explore topics of emotional wellbeing, loneliness and isolation there is the chance that some people may find the answering the questions distressing. At the end of the interview, we will discuss

how you found the experience and how you are feeling. Information for support services can be provided.

Who has reviewed this study? Approval has been given by the UCC Psychology Research Ethics Committee, and all members of the research team have been Garda vetted.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact:

Aoife O' Carroll (Trainee Clinical Psychologist, UCC): 119226033@umail.ucc.ie

Mike Murphy (Research Supervisor) UCC: mike.murphy@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please fill out the consent form attached.

Appendix F

Author Guidelines for Aging and Mental Health

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- Should be between 7,000 and 8,000 words, inclusive of:
    - Tables
    - References
    - Figure or table captions
- Should contain a structured abstract of 200 words.

Objectives, Methods, Results, Conclusion

- Should contain between 5 and 7 **keywords**. Read making your article more discoverable, including information on choosing a title and search engine optimization.

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Updated 8th July 2025

Appendix G:

Interview Schedule

- How long have you been using the internet?
- How did you start with social networking sites?
- How did you develop online skills?
- What is your experience with using social networking sites?
- Can you describe what you do on social networking sites?
- How does using social networking sites make you feel?
- What do you like or dislike about using social networking sites?
- Is there anything that makes using social networking sites difficult?
- Is there anything that would make using social networking sites easier?
- How do you feel about your social circle? Do you feel supported?
- How comfortable do you feel posting or commenting on social media where other people can see your activity?
- Do you use social networking sites during the lockdown? If so, what was the experience like?

Appendix H

Coded transcript

Person	Data Item	Initial Codes
I	Can you describe what you do on social networking sites?	
P	Facebook I check every day I check sites like in the local the local site. In the local town, see what the council are putting up or what's going on, or what they're complaining about now. I would also I have friends who are I write poetry as well and I I do a little bit of history, but mostly poetry now. So a lot of poets here and there would be friends of mine, so I'd be checking and seeing what's going on. Are there calls for submissions? Who has been published somewhere and is boasting about it. That kind of thing. And so I've been checking that every day, so that keeps me in touch with that community now, I've. I post seldom enough on Facebook. If I get published somewhere, then I'll probably post about that myself in a quiet, reserved way and put a picture of something of sometimes if I'm out with grandchildren and a football match, soccer match or something, I might put that up as well. Picture maybe, but not a lot, but I would, you know. I still keep a presence there and I still would. Maybe every month, every two weeks, 3 weeks I would have something up on Facebook, but mostly is to check what's going on in the big, wider world of of poetry and. And and locally as well.	Daily use of Facebook. Using FB to see what's going on in locality. Using FB to connect with poetry interest group. Poetry friend in social circle Using FB to keep up to date with happening in poetry community. Daily checking in on poetry community online SNS helps to keep in touch with poetry community Seldomly posting on FB Posting about achievement on FB Posting style on FB is quiet and reserved Documenting experiencing with Grandchildren on FB through posting photos Keeping a presence on FB Posting on FB every 2 or 3 weeks FB use mostly to check in with poetry community and local matters.
I	How many people would you be connected with on Facebook?	
P	How many friends would I have Facebook? Well, I suppose you can check that, can't you? I'm really not interested. Usually in that kind of. Thing, but I will. I'll check it on my other computer. And it's like, I don't know, but I've I've a reasonable amount. I'm trying to use two computers aI only have 7 hundred 711 friends. I think that's a small number no?	Not interested in amount of FB friends. Large network of FB friends.
I	Not, for me, anyway, no.	
P	Alright, well I have 711 friends now. Who? Who? They are? I don't know. But a lot of them would be poets from around about. Not just Ireland, but. Britain and and abroad as well.	Not aware of who his FB friends list consists of. Fellow poets part of his FB friends. FB friends with geographically distant poets.

I	So I suppose I'm wondering. You'd be friends then, with not just your close friends and family. There'd be kind of a wide spread of people, you might not know well?	
P	Ohh yes, yeah. I mean many of those. I I you know, now I probably don't know who they are. And you look at who your friends are, you can. Ohh there they are. And right. No. No ideas. Yeah, I mean, my family are there. They're all there. There's a poet in Canada who I correspond with very often. There's somebody who worked with me, but some time since I've seen her and so on. A big mix of family and relations, yes, including cousins abroad in Australia, then people I've met and know from poetry. And then people I've met and you know I. Hardly ever get in touch with now, but they're still there, and so I presume they see anything if I put it up.	Many FB friends who he does not know well. Connected with family on FB. FB friends with geographically distant poets. Regular correspondence with geographically distant poet. Connected with previous colleague. Connected with people he has not seen for a while. Connected with geographically distant family on FB. Connected with people he rarely gets in touch with on FB.
I	So for what you put up yourself. That would be mainly updates about what's going on with you?	More distant contacts sees what he posts on FB.
P	Yes, especially as regards poetry probably. Or, you know history as well. If I was doing any talks or anything in history, but I haven't been doing many of those. But poetry, if I was given a reading somewhere, I'd probably put advance notice of that up. And then might be a picture too, from the event itself, if I was published in a magazine or somewhere, I would also mention that. And if there was a reading involved, I could get a photograph of that, or maybe link it, you know, to say video of it linked to that, something like that. So it's part just of promoting myself generally. I mean there is an. Element of that in the poetry world. What you where you have to. Keep promoting yourself. It's it's cut throat.	Posts about poetry Posts about history talks Posts notice about poetry reading Posts pictures from poetry event Would post about publishing/achievement in poetry Promotes poetry works on FB
I	Would you say it's is your Facebook use more for your professional life? That's what you'd call it then?	Need to promote self for poetry
P	Like. Yeah, if you call it that, yes, yeah. I would I I'd hardly ever put anything personal. Yeah. If I was. At a football match, as I sometimes bring the children to soccer matches and I might take a photograph of us there or just a photograph of the of the match. You know, saying that I'm here at it. That's about all.	FB use rarely to post anything personal. Sometimes posts to document outings with Grandchildren.
I	And would you get comments or likes from people?	

P	Yeah. Yeah. I mean, if it's the family thing, then I'm going to get mostly from and relations. If it's the poetry thing, then a lot of other, you know, friends, poets will say thank you or well done or that kind of thing. What's it like for you then, when people interact with you in that way?	Feedback is context dependent. Receiving positive feedback from others in poetry community.
I		
P	Well, I like it. I mean, I I like the the fact that you know, every now and then I do put something up from the poetry world and then other poets react with that. So that gives me the feeling that I am still there in that because you know I've my. It's it's not easy to get around now at my age. OK, I can still move around fairly well, but going to Dublin for instance for a poetry reading of an evening, especially in the winter, is not attractive anymore. So I normally wouldn't do that. So I don't maybe get out and about quite as much as I did say 10 years ago. So just to keep, if you like my face out there, my name out there that's useful that way. And then you. But. Well, there are friends and some of them are actual friends. OK, I might not talk to them very often, but I would still regard them as real friends, not Facebook friends. So it's nice, like when they make make contact with you and then you reply to them or something like that. And of course, when they put a post like that, I will also like it or maybe even go further and say well done. Congratulations as well. Just to keep that kind of community going and it does give you a sense of being. In a community.	Positive influence on PWB from receiving engagement on posts. Feeling of inclusion in poetry community. Less mobility as aging Less likely to attend in person events Less mobility as aging. FB allows him to keep presence in poetry community. Considers people friends even if not in regular contact. Distinction made between "real" and FB friends. Appreciates ability to stay in contact with more distant friends on FB. Reciprocal encouragement vis FB.
I	And that's a very interesting point that you made about, you know, not being able to be places physically as much anymore, but still feeling part of it. Over social media. Yeah, yeah. OK. So you also mentioned you use. Did you say you used X?	FB use to foster sense of community.
P	Yeah, but to be honest, very little itself. And Instagram. And again, like, if I'm putting a photograph on Facebook, I sometimes also put on Instagram or x. But to be honest. Never technically mastered Instagram, so sometimes you know when you get the photograph and you say share and it asks you do want to share an Instagram. I share an Instagram. OK, there's a there's an Instagram now. You know, I don't know how long it appears or whether it's, you know, there's two different things. Anyway, I've never got into that. And I, you know, to be honest, I don't really want to because Facebook does what what I want it to do. As it was at the moment.	Rarely uses X. Will occasionally share photos to X and Instagram. Does not feel has mastered Instagram. Will share to Instagram when prompted by app. Little knowledge of Instagram.

	So you don't kind of go and see if people have commented on your Instagram?	Little interest in using Instagram. FB fulfills needs so sees no need for Instagram.
I	Sometimes I try and I give up sometimes and sometimes yes, I see it. And you know that it it will show you on the top whether they have comments or. It's also on Facebook itself. Twitter yes the same kind of thing? Maybe I I would check Twitter maybe more often than Instagram, because I think	Difficulties using Instagram.
P	I use Twitter a little bit more.	Occasionally will see replies on Instagram.
	So again, kind of more for promotion of your poetry?	Slightly more frequent X use.
I	That kind of thing. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I also have a website. But it's a it's a non maintained website. I did it myself years ago when I was good at that kind of thing and I really haven't updated it at all recently. It's very heavy, it's old	Promotion of poetry on X
P	fashioned and all that kind of thing. It's still there. You know, I just leave it there. I didn't take it down.	Made website for poetry promotion. Sense of being better with technology in the past.
	And is that an interactive thing or is it more “this is information about me”?	Has not recently updated website.
I	More information, yes, just old fashioned way. Some kind of software I was using the time which I probably don't have anymore and to be honest you know I I wouldn't update it. I'd be more inclined to take it down than update it, but there's	
P	lots of information there on the screen.	Static webpage seen as old fashioned.
	You mentioned that you use WhatsApp. Can you tell me a bit about your experience of that?	Little interest in maintaining webpage.
I	Yeah, I use WhatsApp all the time. WhatsApp is kind of the way we and the family communicate. Yeah, and like I have, I have four children and various grandchildren, some grown up and so on.	
P	So everybody gets on WhatsApp. You know, if I meet someone somewhere and And we become friends they go on WhatsApp as well, Then WhatsApp is really the main way I communicate, much more now than emails, emails, yeah, emails as well. If you want to write a long, rambling e-mail, you write an e-mail. or Maybe sometimes if you're sending a lot of stuff, maybe by e-mail. But WhatsApp is the more general chatty thing If you like.	Regular use of WhatsApp. WhatsApp primary mode of communication with family. Various family members. WhatsApp is used by all family. WhatsApp primary mode of contact for new social connections.
	So would WhatsApp be kind of more for your general communication with the people that you're close to?	WhatsApp primary mode of communication with others. WhatsApp used more than email.

		Emails useful for lengthy communications.
I	Yeah. With everyone. Yeah. Anyone that that you know, in the old age you've been ringing. WhatsApp is what you do now with everyone. Like there's no category I would exclude from that.	WhatsApp for general conversation.
P	And would you have group chats and things like that?	WhatsApp main mode of contact for all social contacts.
I	Yeah, yeah. There's one or two family ones, you know, ones with someone and ones without someone. Larger ones and smaller ones. And I'm in a poetry group here in [Place-name]. And we have a WhatsApp group as well, which we don't use very often, to be honest. What it is there. And what else have we got? There's another	Reference to ringing people in the past. WhatsApp has replaced phone calls.
P	organisation I'm involved with here, belonging to the church, so I'm also we have a WhatsApp group, you know. There's a retired teachers WhatsApp group and then some of them get very, very boring because you know, people are gonna put on the same funny videos on every single one of them. You can see it running through the country almost. They're fine, and they're good for information. Some of those groups. Yeah, but for ordinary, just communicating with someone. I mean, I have a poetry friend in in Canada. A lady who is in Canada, she actually visited Ireland twice and we we you know, some days she's still she's still working some days on WhatsApp will be over and back over and back over and back. For instance I got word yesterday that I had been published in a magazine in Ireland she also submitted that magazine but hasn't heard yet. So a couple of times today she reached out on WhatsApp and And you said "no, I haven't heard yet. No, no, I haven't heard yet." So that kind of thing.	Family group chats on WhatsApp Tailored group chats on WhatsApp WhatsApp group chat for different social groups WhatsApp group chat for local poetry community WhatsApp group chat for religious group WhatsApp group chat for retired colleagues Feeling of repetition at what is shared on WhatsApp group WhatsApp group useful for information. WhatsApp use to communicate with geographically distant poetry friend. Ease of back and forth on WhatsApp.
I	And so a bit of a broader question, how would you say that using social networking sites has impacted your life, if at all? Well, I I, I mean honestly, I think it has made a huge a huge impact on it. That's not as much changing anything. I suppose it's just allowing you to easily keep in touch with the outside world with friends, with what's going on everywhere.	Communication around poetry topics on WhatsApp.
P	. Staying connected. Yeah. I mean, I'd be Very positive about it. You know, they're probably negative Things here and there, you know, and you know the kind of e-mails you get that you don't want to get. And all that. Kind of thing, but, but I'd be very, very positive. It just keeps you in	SNS has made huge impact on life. Does not alter core life circumstances.

	touch and especially in something like poetry, which is kind of a niche.	Emphasises ease of communication. Staying socially connected Helps sustain existing social ties SNS sustains outward engagement. Positive attitude towards SNS. Acknowledges possibility of drawbacks. Unwanted contact/spam. SNS facilitates staying connected. SNS supports niche interests.

Appendix I

Example of Audit Trail for Reflexive thematic analysis

Meaning Unit	Codes	Sub Categories	Sub-Categories	Theme
"I can keep in touch with family and friends. So that's good, specially cause my one son lives in Australia so."	Keeping in touch with family and friends. Staying connected with geographically distant family.	Using SNS to maintain family bonds. Overcoming barriers of geography	Maintaining close-ties through everyday emotional connection	SNS use for social connection and psychological wellbeing
"We were trying to fill in all the intervening years, so it brought back a lot of memories. About how we ended up in Canada and, you know, she had liked my mom and she remembered my sister.. It made us revisit our whole history from the age of 12 up to the age we were to give each other a potted history"	Reconnecting through shared life history Reconstructing long-term personal memories Engaging in nostalgic reflection Re-establishing an early-life relationship Filling in missing life-story gaps	Reconnecting with someone from early life Emotional nostalgia	Reconnection and nostalgia	
"I look at videos of aircraft doing various things. I look at car advertisements for classic cars and stories about classic cars and that kind of thing and occasionally interact with some of the posters concerning whatever they've been talking about… I don't have friends that	Engaging with niche interests online Consuming hobby-related media Participating in hobby-specific online discussions	Being part of an online hobby community Connecting with others who share a specialist interest	Shared interests, community and belonging	

are into any of those things at all. So I mostly talk about it online." "I would say that it gave some sort of normality… you know, that at least you weren't in total isolation… that there were other human beings as disorientated as you were… I think that without it, it would have been horrific."	Lack of offline friends with shared interests Reducing feelings of isolation Perceiving connection with others in similar situations Emotional reassurance through online presence of others SNS as psychological support during disorienting times	Comforting presence of others online SNS counteracting isolation	Digital companionship	
"And I didn't like that, I got a few bad experiences of that from people. You know, people cursing at me, swearing and so on. I didn't know who they were at all."	Exposure to swearing and verbal aggression Negative encounters with strangers online Feeling distressed by hostile interactions	Being targeted with hostility Emotional discomfort from online strangers	Online incivility and hostility	Negative online experiences

	Anonymous hostility			
“The corporations that run these platforms have a responsibility. Nobody is holding them to account. They just get richer and richer and richer. And it seems that the legislature is not bothered by it. I presume they're not personally affected, generally speaking, so they don't care. And in any case, the monetization of these things is so large that I suppose they can be bought off easily. I'm sorry to be a bit sceptical, but I think that's the reality.”	Lack of corporate accountability Absence of regulatory oversight Profit-driven behaviour of SNS companies Distrust in government regulation Cynicism about political–corporate influence Perception of unchecked monetisation Concerns about systemic irresponsibility	Concerns about companies not being held accountable Perceptions of inadequate governmental regulation	Lack of regulation and accountability on SNS	
“I used scroll for so long that I’d end up feeling worse, kind of drained. I didn’t even enjoy it, but I kept doing it anyway.”	Mindless, prolonged scrolling Negative emotional aftermath Low enjoyment despite continued use Difficulty disengaging	Negative emotional effects Using SNS without purpose	Passive scrolling	

“But like I didn't reply to any of them because I've seen that you cannot reply to them, because then you’ll become the subject of hate as well. And I mean, it’s a small town. We’re all well known.”	Avoiding engagement to prevent becoming a target Fear of escalation or retaliation Awareness of social consequences in a small community Protective silence in online conflict	Self protection from online hostiltiy Managing reputation in a close knit community	Selective engagement and protective boundary setting	Agency, control and boundaries in enhancing SNS use
“But when Facebook was on there (mobile) I would just go into it and you could spend the rest of the night on Facebook and I found that very counterproductive. So I have it on my iPad… and I don't take it up because it's a lot harder to hold in bed… the screen is bigger and I can't really take it underneath the duvet… whereas with the iPad it's just too large to hold in bed. So it was for pragmatic reasons that I got rid of it.”	Excessive nighttime scrolling on mobile Feeling use was counterproductive Removing the app to reduce overuse Switching device to limit habit Using physical inconvenience as a barrier Structuring environment to control SNS access	Time-limiting strategies Environmental/ structural self-regulation	Time management strategies	
“Not really, I mean, it would have been long and laborious contacting the	SNS makes coordination more efficient	Streamlined communication Practical/utilitarian use of SNS	Making everyday communication easier	SNS use as a practical everyday tool

individuals separately and trying to set up appointments and things. So it's made it much easier. Yeah, that's the thing I love about it. So it's quite practical. I'm very practical."	Reduces effort compared to contacting people individually Facilitates group communication Enhances convenience in organising plans Practical motivation for SNS use			
"It's not easy to get around now at my age. OK, I can still move around fairly well, but going to Dublin for instance for a poetry reading of an evening, especially in the winter, is not attractive anymore. So I normally wouldn't do that. So I don't maybe get out and about quite as much as I did say 10 years ago. So just to keep, if you like, my face out there, my name out there, that's useful that way.	Reduced mobility limiting social participation Less willingness to attend in-person events Age-related barriers to social engagement Using online presence as a substitute for physical attendance Maintaining visibility in interest communities via SNS Judgement of SNS as useful	Overcoming age-related mobility constraints Using SNS to maintain participation and visibility	Combatting restrictions caused by older age	

Appendix J:

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Total Positive PANAS	.105	117	.003	.967	117	.006
Total Negative PANAS	.217	117	<.001	.723	117	<.001
Total SWLS	.151	118	<.001	.934	118	<.001
Total SNS Maintain Close	.074	118	.156	.969	118	.008
Total SNS weaker ties	.122	118	<.001	.948	118	<.001
Total SNS diversion	.121	118	<.001	.971	118	.013

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Appendix K:

Comparison of parametric and non parametric tests

Comparison of Pearson's and Spearman's Correlations Between SNS Use Variables and PANAS Scores

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p (2-tailed)	Spearman ρ	p (2-tailed)
SNS Maintain Close – SNS Weaker Ties	.376**	< .001	.347**	< .001
SNS Maintain Close – SNS Diversion	.143	.120	.126	.170
SNS Maintain Close – Positive PANAS	.214*	.021	.283**	.002
SNS Maintain Close – Negative PANAS	−.078	.403	−.146	.115
SNS Weaker Ties – SNS Diversion	.353**	< .001	.325**	< .001
SNS Weaker Ties – Positive PANAS	.121	.197	.211*	.023
SNS Weaker Ties – Negative PANAS	.078	.399	−.107	.251
SNS Diversion – Positive PANAS	−.058	.535	−.063	.500
SNS Diversion – Negative PANAS	.041	.660	.039	.674
Positive PANAS – Negative PANAS	−.427**	< .001	−.325**	< .001

Comparison of Parametric and Non-Parametric Correlations (SWLS & SNS variables)

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p (2-tailed)	Spearman ρ	p (2-tailed)
SWLS – SNS Maintain Close	.195*	.032	.213*	.019
SWLS – SNS Weaker Ties	.106	.251	.133	.151
SWLS – SNS Diversion	−.024	.794	−.025	.784
SNS Maintain Close – SNS Weaker Ties	.376**	< .001	.347**	< .001

SNS Maintain Close – SNS Diversion	.143	.120	.126	.170
SNS Weaker Ties – SNS Diversion	.353**	< .001	.325**	< .001

Bivariate Pearson and Spearman Correlations Between Psychological Wellbeing, SNS Use Variables, Perceived Social Support, and Shyness

Variable Pair	**Pearson r**	**p (2-tailed)**	**Spearman ρ**	**p (2-tailed)**
Positive PANAS - Negative PANAS	−.427**	<.001	−.325**	<.001
Positive PANAS - SWLS	.551**	<.001	.464**	<.001
Positive PANAS – Maintain Close	.214*	0.21.	.283**	.002
Positive PANAS – Weak-ties	.121	.197	.221*	.023
Positive PANAS - Diversion	-.058	.535	-.063	.500
Positive PANAS - Shyness	-.521**	<.001	-.472**	<.001
Positive PANAS - MSPSS	.366**	< .001	.411**	< .001
Negative PANAS - SWLS	−.621**	< .001	−.520**	< .001
Negative PANAS – Maintain Close	−.078	.403	−.146	.115
Negative PANAS – Weak-ties	.078	.399	-.107	.251
Negative PANAS – Diversion	.041	.660	.039	.674
Negative PANAS – Shyness	.338**	< .001	.216*	.022
Negative PANAS - MSPSS	−.369**	< .001	−.389**	< .001
SWLS – SNS Maintain Close	.915*	.032	.213*	.019
SWLS – Weak-ties	.106	.251	.133	.151
SWLS Diversion	−.024	.794	−.025	.784

Comparison of Parametric and Non-Parametric Tests for Gender Differences

Outcome Variable	Independent samples: t(df)	t Test P (2 tailed)	Mann Whintey U test p (2 tailed)
Positive PANAS	−0.374 (116)	.709	.458
Negative PANAS	0.130 (117)	.897	.622
SWLS	−1.024 (119)	.308	.402

Comparison of Parametric and Non-Parametric Tests for bereavement

Outcome Variable	Independent samples: t(df)	t Test P (2 tailed)	Mann Whintey U test p (2 tailed)
Positive PANAS	−0.562 (115)	.575	.993
Negative PANAS	−0.016 (116)	.987	.733
SWLS	0.350 (118)	.727	.704

Comparison of Parametric and Non-Parametric Tests for employment status

Outcome Variable	Independent samples: t(df)	t Test P (2 tailed)	Mann Whintey U test p (2 tailed)
Positive PANAS	−0.227 (116)	.821	.965
Negative PANAS	0.838 (117)	.404	.560
SWLS	−1.560 (119)	.121	.257

Comparison of Parametric and Non-Parametric Tests for income

Outcome Variable	Independent samples: t(df)	t Test P (2 tailed)	Mann Whintey U test p (2 tailed)
Positive PANAS	1.077 (116)	.284	.307
Negative PANAS	0.281 (117)	.779	.890
SWLS	−2.007 (119)	.047	.034