



**POSTED: A STUDY INTO THE EVOLUTION OF
YOUNG PEOPLE’S SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE
SINCE THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

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degree of Bachelor in Humanities and Social Sciences*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted in support of another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are cited and included.

I also hereby acknowledge that my thesis will be made publicly available pursuant to Section 47b of Act No. 111/1998 Coll. and AAU's internal regulations.

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(4/27/2023)

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigated the attitudes and behaviors of young people ages 15 to 21 concerning their social media usage since the onset of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. 102 participants of this demographic who use social media were recruited to complete a short and simple questionnaire on their feelings and experiences with using social media for interpersonal communication. Spending an average of 5.7 hours on their phones as of April 2023, participants generally reported using social media more in general and for communicating with friends. Despite this, they generally preferred and more highly valued in-person communication when possible. Additionally, using assumptions and ideas from the Uses and Gratification media theory, it was found that Instagram was the most commonly used social media platform used by young people to fulfill their cognitive needs, affective needs, integrative needs, social contact; and disconnection. Given the disparities in the ideal and the actual ways and amounts that this demographic uses social media, further research into this area is needed to better understand how social media use can be restricted in certain areas of life and used appropriately.

KEYWORDS

Social media, Instagram, Covid-19 2020 quarantine, uses and gratifications theory

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about unimaginable changes in the lives of everyone worldwide; our methods of working, schooling, and interacting with peers have been affected. More specifically, the pandemic has potentially changed the way that teenagers and young adults (ages 15-21) ordinarily interact with their friends. Without the ability to regularly interact in face-to-face settings, this demographic was forced to resort to entirely virtual communication with a typically in-person group in many aspects of life: school, extracurricular activities, and even spending time with friends. The occurrence of the pandemic has possibly led to this demographic preferring to spend time with peers on social networking sites. As the first pandemic in the era of cell phones and social media, this specific usage of social media in such a widespread manner was previously unheard of and can be solely attributed to the necessary public health precautions taken in response to Covid-19. With this being such a recent development, it is still largely unstudied, and, therefore, the extent to which the online interactions this demographic now has are unknown. Since the creation of the first social networking sites, researchers have sought to understand how it can affect our lives. In the past 25 years, we have become able to create, share, and consume media at rates unimaginable in the past with incredible ease. Pre-adolescent consumers are “heavy consumers” of TikTok (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020), Teenagers and young adults now are often the target audience of many social networking site, and it has been long questioned how these platforms shape the social interactions of this developing group.

The scope of the aforementioned research area will be largely limited to studied demographics in the United States of America, the European Union, and the United Kingdom countries, so the reader may fully grasp the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on a more manageable demographic. The research question will try to answer the following: How

have teenagers' and young adults' (ages 15-21) habits and preferences for using social networking sites like Instagram changed since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic? Although the research will be limited, it is the goal that a general conclusion will be found that can be tentatively applied to similar demographics outside of the one explicitly concerned in this thesis.

The theoretical framework that will be applied to this case is the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). This theory explains that individuals use various forms of media to gratify their needs in some way. Although its roots can be traced back to the 1940s, UGT theory gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s after the development of many new forms of mass media (Ruggiero, 2000). The theory places a strong emphasis on the active role that audiences play in their choice and consumption of media, which is highly relevant today as individuals are able to uniquely tailor the media they consume with unprecedented precision. According to this theory, some of the reasons people use social networking sites could be to gratify their needs for socialization and entertainment, which technology companies often market as reasons why users should use their specific social media platform. Furthermore, this theory posits that there are four main factors that affect media use: gratifications sought, gratifications obtained, media exposure, and individual preferences:

1. Gratifications sought: the gratification(s) that an individual seeks to gain from interacting with a piece of media; their motivation for using the media
2. Gratifications obtained: the gratification(s) actually gained from the consumption of a given piece of media, which may be different from the gratification that the individual sought to gain
3. Media exposure: the forms of media that an individual is regularly exposed to and has access to
4. Individual Preferences: the various preferences that different individuals have

in the forms of media that they consume, which affects the actual media they choose to consume (E.g. auditory, physical, or tactile preferences)

All of these factors are important in understanding the usage of media (including social media) because even if consumers are not presently and actively thinking about them, they affect the circumstances in which they use media. Without any given one of these factors, researchers would also be missing key context in the use of different media (E.g. not knowing the gratifications sought when consumers watch television means that much of the Uses and Gratifications theory cannot be effectively utilized).

One of the prevalent critiques of UGT theory is its reliance on the active role that individuals play in choosing media for consumption because not everyone has access to the same media. Recently, the active role consumers play has been further questioned after TikTok, an extremely popular social media platform, is being sued for its possible role in the early 2022 suicide of an American teen by repeatedly pushing content promoting self-harm and suicide onto his feed (Carville, 2023). In the specific case of this thesis, the perception of control and active participation of the concerned demographic will be the focus, and the respondents will be assumed to have generally free access to a widely varying selection of media. The research question of this study is mainly concerned with the individual preferences for social media usage and the common changes that can be attributed to how the studied demographic has used social media since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research methodology to draw a meaningful conclusion on the previously stated matter will be straightforward for the sake of intelligibility on this largely convoluted issue. More specifically, it consists of primary data collection in the form of a questionnaire that will be distributed to the concerned demographic. The data from this study will be analyzed and compared to the findings of many past studies on the social media usage habits and

preferences of teenagers and young adults from before the onset of the pandemic. From this analysis, a reliable conclusion will be able to be drawn to answer how the Covid-19 pandemic has possibly affected the preferences in social media interaction of this group. Mainly, the data collected in the pre-pandemic era will be from 2012-2018, while the primary data was collected in April 2023. Further study into this area is important because it will not only track the current interaction preferences of teens and young adults to gain a better understanding of how common usage of these platforms from a relatively young age and isolation of a pandemic can affect one's preferences for communicating with friends and peers, but it will also contribute to the continuous study of young people's attitudes and experiences toward social media. As a vulnerable popular that is also the target of many social media platforms, it is important to note the evolution of all of these factors over time. In addition to the data and statistics, the analysis will also take into account the notes and comments the questionnaire participants deem as relevant and elect to provide. The opinions and personal insights given will be worked into a reliable explanation of the changes the research area has seen since the pandemic began. Due to the pandemic's ongoing nature, it cannot be said that the conclusion found in this study will be able to effectively state how the entire pandemic will affect the communication habits of young people; the conclusion will only be able to come to conclusions of the correlations between the pandemic's circumstances and the social media usage, experiences, and attitudes of young people. This thesis proceeds as follows: In the first section, there is a concise literature review. The next section details the survey methodology. The following section analyzes the data from the questionnaire. The last section concludes this thesis.

1. Literature Review

1.1 *Social Media (General)*

After more than 20 years since their most rudimentary forms were created, social media has taken the world by storm. Despite this, there have been few attempts to define exactly what social media is, as pointed out in “Twenty-Five Years of Social Media: A Review of Social Media Applications and Definitions From 1994 to 2019.” This study investigated the different uses and applications of social media since its invention, and for the purpose of this thesis the section on “Socializing with Friends and Family” will be mainly referenced. Authors Aichner, Grunfelder, Waurer, and Jengeni write that this socializing is a key component in many social media platforms. More specifically, as socialization with peers online is the focus of this thesis, information on the history of “online communities” on these social networking sites is particularly key. A prime example of the reach of social networking sites is Instagram; Launched in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger as a simple photo-sharing app, it has now become one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. Boasting about one billion monthly active users (*Biggest Social Media Platforms 2023* | Statista, 2023), Instagram has grown past its original purpose by allowing users to directly message one another, post videos, temporary stories, polls, and more. Instagram has gone from being used for only sharing photos to being the go-to communication platform of a generation by providing fresh features that encourage continued use of the app. These new features contribute to social networking sites' abilities to strengthen relationships according to Aichner et al., as they reinforce the in-person interactions users have. Another massively popular social media platform is TikTok. TikTok (formerly Musical.ly) is owned by Chinese technology company ByteDance Ltd. and its psychological effects are largely unexplored. Researchers Christian Montag, Haibo Yand, and Jon Elhai specifically write that “despite its

success in terms of user numbers, psychological studies aiming at an understanding of TikTok use are scarce.” (Montag et al., 2021). Reaching 1.05 billion active users in the first quarter of 2023 (Kepios, 2023) and likely more at the time of publication of this thesis, there is still a gap in the research concerning this app.

1.2 Teens’ and Young Adults’ Studied Behavior and Feelings Regarding Social Media Usage Prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Since the inception of what we now call “social media,” there has been intrigue about how it is used. Particularly in the case of minors, parents and researchers alike have been curious, and often worried, about the usage of (and possible dependence upon) social media. As of 2006, 55% of Americans ages 12-17 had used a social networking site (Pew Research Center, 2010), and this percentage has continued to climb to 73% in 2009 and all the way to 90% as of March 2018 (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018). Not only has the general use of social media among this age group increased since it was first studied, but there have also been demographic changes. In 2006, girls were more likely to use social media than boys, but they now use social media at very similar rates (Pew Research Center, 2010). Similarly, wealthier Americans were previously more likely to use a social networking site than lower-income Americans, which was largely attributed to their having better access to the technology (laptops) necessary to access these platforms in the first place. In contrast, by 2009 it was lower-income American teens who were more likely to use social networking sites on a daily basis than those from higher-income families (Pew Research Center, 2010).

In more recent years, research surrounding the area of social media usage by young people has continued and become more specialized than in the past. Similarly, social media usage has become more widespread as time passes. A study by Rideout and Robb from Common Sense Media found that social media use among teenagers has drastically increased

since 2012. While in 2012, only 34% of American teens reported using social media multiple times a day, that percentage has more than doubled to 70% for the same age demographic.

One particular concern that has plagued researchers is the possible negative impacts social media can have on young people. While the negative effects of social media are often sensationalized by mass media and parents alike, self-reports from teens themselves actually show that social media has more perceived positive effects than negatives. Rideout and Robb's same survey found that 25% of teens report that social media makes them feel less lonely, while only 3% reported that it makes them feel more lonely. Similarly, many more teens said that using social media makes them feel more popular, confident, and better about themselves than teens who said the opposite. Pew Research Center had similar findings in their own study, which found that teens were much more likely to report that using social media makes them feel more included among their peers than excluded. In contrast, the amount of hateful content available on social media has been noticed by teens. Rideout and Robb (2018) did find that 64% of teenage social media users reported that they either "often" or "sometimes" encounter homophobic, racist, sexist, or religious-based hateful content on social media. By and large, teens generally reported positive feelings and experiences associated with their own use of social media. Due to a lack of recent research in this specific area, it is unclear whether various phenomena such as the 2020 United States presidential election, the worldwide resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the uptick in popularity of social media stars known for their controversial (and often denigrating content) such as Andrew Tate will have caused teens to encounter more hateful content since the onset of the pandemic.

The potentially addictive nature of social media has been a point of contention since it was created, especially in the case of minors. As its use has become more common among younger age cohorts, parents. A comparison of studies conducted by the Pew Research

Center in 2006 and 2012 found that teenagers across the board used social media more and posted photos of themselves more often in 2012 than in 2006 (Madden et al., 2013).

Additionally, more recent studies have expanded upon research into this topic and found that teens and young adults used social media even more in the late 2010s than at the beginning of the decade.

A 2018 survey by Common Sense found that teenagers generally prefer indirect communication (such as posting online for multiple friends to see) over direct communication with friends (Rideout & Robb, 2018). With another 2018 study by Hopelab and Well Being Trust finding that approximately 93% of individuals ages 14-22 used social media and 81% of them using it daily, this preference for indirect communication can be reliably assumed to apply to most teenagers and young adults (Rideout et al., 2018). Social networking sites incorporate indirect communication into their platforms in multiple ways such as Direct Messages (similar to texting), stories (posts only available for a limited time), and comment sections on users' posts, and the same survey by Common Sense found that this is attractive to teens; Being able to interact with and respond to friends messages on your own terms is preferable to being stuck in the moment when interacting in person. Victoria Rideout, one of the authors of Common Sense's study said that "in another six years from now, these statistics may seem quaint" (2018) in reference to their finding that social networking sites have invaded the daily lives of teenagers. After a global pandemic prevented teens from having regular in-person interaction with friends for multiple months, it is likely that the prevalence and preferences they found in 2018 will be further exacerbated in more recent studies.

Teens also appeared to be at least somewhat cognizant of the various motivations that technology companies have when designing social networking platforms. As of 2018, nearly 75% of teens say that they believe technology companies manipulate their users into spending more time on their personal devices (Rideout & Robb). Additionally, this same

survey found that 57% of teens admit that social media distracts them when they should be doing their homework and 54% report that their phone distracts them when they should be present with the people they are with. User manipulation by technology companies is not just a conspiracy. For example, in early 2012, Facebook ran an experiment in which they manipulated the feeds of nearly 700,000 users to show them either only positive or only negative content for an entire week to see how their moods were affected (Hill, 2014). While the “study” was formulated with the assistance of Cornell University, it did not go through an approval process by a university ethics board. Participants in the study were not made aware of it and Facebook did not receive explicit consent to manipulate their feeds (or moods) in such a manner. This experiment is just one of what could be many, as generally technology companies are not required to bring exactly how they use and manipulate the usage data users provide.

Despite the apparent intrusion that phones and social media are into the real lives of teens, there is also evidence that social media is good for their social lives. Pew’s 2018 study found that 15% of teens surveyed had a close friend that they first met online. Additionally, this appears to vary based on the highest level of education the teen’s parent achieved. Pew observed that of the 15% of teens who had a close friend they first met online, 24% of their parents had either a high school education or lower, 15% of their parents had completed some college, and 9% of their parents had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. While there is not a causal relationship established concerning this variable, there does appear to be a strong correlation between the two factors. In short, more educated people’s children are less likely to turn to online platforms to find close friends. One way that social media possibly helps teens create new friendships is through online groups and forms such as Facebook groups or Reddit subreddits. As of 2018, nearly half of teens sometimes spend time in online groups. These groups span a wide variety of topics including fashion, dating, politics, and

identity-specific groups (LGBT, people of color, disabilities or chronic illness, etc) (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Unlike general usage of social media, boys and girls appear to participate in forums differently based on their topic; Boys were more likely to spend time in forums focusing on gaming and sport, while girls were more likely to participate in those focusing on dating, fashion, and health and wellness (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). These forums are not only for passing time, though; a full 55% of teens say that online forums helped in some way to get them through a tough time in their lives. This is another aspect that is divided by gender, with 24% of girls agreeing, while only 14% of boys agreed. Boy boys and girls whose parents had completed either some high school or less were nearly twice as likely than those whose parents had higher levels of education to feel social media helped them through tough times (29% vs. 14.5%). All in all, teens have positive attitudes toward their use of social media to create new connections and the impact that this has on their social well-being.

Furthermore, Pew's same 2018 survey found that not only did social media facilitate the creation of new friendships online, but it also assisted in the maintenance of existing relationships. While school and extracurricular activities have been shown to be the most common avenues, while teens make friends, they actually spend more time with those same friends than they do in person. 81% of teens reported spending time online with friends several times a week and every day, while only 50% reported doing the same in person (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). While this 30% difference in the two values may only seem drastic on paper, teens themselves report noticing the difference, with 36% of teens saying that they believe they spend too little time interacting with their friends in person (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Many of these same teens say that they would like to spend more time in person with friends but cite a variety of reasons (being busy, friends being busy, lack of transportation, or parents not allowing them to go out) in addition to the ease of using social media for the same purpose in their lack of face-to-face interaction.

While Facebook used to be young people's go-to social media platform, newer apps like Snapchat and Instagram have proven to be teens' new favorites. 41% of teens reported that they used Snapchat the most out of all social media platforms, and another 22% reported using Instagram the most (Rideout and Robb, 2018)

1.3 Teens' and Young Adults' Social Media Usage During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The use of social networking sites has skyrocketed since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. This change was soon noticeable, with 63% of U.S. parents reporting that they noticed their teens using social media more than they did in pre-pandemic times (Statista). As in-person interaction between teens and their peers (recreational and academic) was not feasible for many months, it is likely that this cohort became more comfortable with exclusively interacting online. While there are multiple surveys that support the notion that teens are preferring indirect contact with friends more and more, there have not yet been updated studies into this as of 2022, which is why the survey of this thesis is necessary to determine if this assumption is accurate. Despite this, it is still important to have a general understanding of how social media usage among this cohort has changed over the course of the pandemic.

One major social networking site became especially popular at the beginning of the pandemic: Tiktok. As of May 2022, nearly 70% of teens reported using Tiktok (Vogels et al., 2022). The same survey found that more than 60% of teens use Instagram. While these findings may not be particularly groundbreaking on their own, the time that adolescents spend on social media daily also has to be taken into account. Pew Research Center's recent study also looked into this. They say that of the five most popular social media platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook) "Fully 35% of teens say they are using at least one of them "almost constantly." While this data does not differentiate between

platforms that are primarily used for the consumption of content, like Youtube, and those targeting active interaction with real-life friends, like Instagram and Snapchat, the frequency of social media usage is still notable, as it has nearly doubled since 2015. As previously mentioned, Rideout and Robb (2018) noted that many teens reported sometimes being distracted from important in-person activities, and this finding that a full third of teens are on social media nearly constantly, it seems plausible that these same teens are almost constantly distracted from their real lives by social media.

1.4 *Uses and Gratifications Theory*

The Uses and Gratifications theory has been applied to a wide range of media. Since the inception of social media, this theory has been used to help understand its use. Katz et al. (1973) explain the theory to be “an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals.” (p. 510). Furthermore, a few elements of Lundberg and Hulten’s 1968 uses and gratifications model are particularly notable: an active audience that is seeking to achieve a goal, an initiative on the audience’s part in partaking in any form of mass media, competition between media and other sources of gratification, and an audience which is cognizant of their needs and motives enough to provide data concerning this topic. These elements could be considered key presuppositions upon which the entire theory rests. In the case of social media, these take a somewhat different shape than originally intended, such as a consumer taking the initiative in creating an account on any given platform for a specific purpose that they could articulate if questioned about it. One thing that could be critiqued in this is that social media does not actually have to compete very hard with other sources of gratification that were more popular in the past (E.g. physical newspapers, books, radio, public lectures, etc.). When many of one’s close relationships are deeply interactive with social media, it has become nearly intuitive and required for many functions of life. For

example, in order for Anglo-American University students to remain up to date on the vast majority of goings on with the university itself and its Student Council, they must be active on Instagram. There are very few, if any, ways that a student could sign up for activities or other things without using social media. This is not an isolated case either; it is the same, or even more imperative, that students be engaged on social media at universities and high schools across the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and other regions. With social media so easily accessible and necessary for much of the world, it is more so that social media is the default and other forms of media have to actively compete for the attention of consumers.

While there are many potential uses and gratifications that mass media may fill, Katz et al. (1973) classified a list of them into 5 categories:

1. Cognitive needs (learning; E.g. watching informational YouTube videos)
2. Affective needs (aesthetics and emotions; E.g. viewing aesthetically pleasing photos on Pinterest)
3. Integrative needs (status; E.g. posting on Instagram in hopes of getting many likes to appear popular and/or relevant)
4. Social contact; E.g. having a private story on Snapchat that friends and family can view and interact with)
5. Disconnection; E.g. mindlessly scrolling and consultation of content on any platform to distract oneself from their own problems)

Bossen and Kottasz's 2020 paper "Uses and Gratifications Sought by Pre-adolescent and Adolescent TikTok Consumers" highlighted the fact that young users are particularly active on TikTok and that an affective need or gratification of entertainment was a highly relevant element in underlying every single one of the behaviors users exhibited when using the platform. The gratification of this need could manifest in multiple ways such as mindless

and continuous strolling for extended periods of time, interacting with other users on the platform via comments, video responses, or direct messages, or even creating original content to post on one's account. Along the same vein, Shao (2009) created a theoretical framework in which users use social media in three different ways:

1. Consumption of content created by other users passively
2. Active participation and interaction with content created by other users (E.g. commenting on videos)
3. Creating and contributing original content

These three ways of using social media can be further classified into just two: interacting with the content created by other people and sharing one's own content. On many platforms, "active participation" with content could be interpreted as something as simple as viewing a video. While the viewing itself may be passive, the various metrics (views, likes, watch time engagement, etc.) can participate in the promotion or demotion of the content using any given platform's algorithms.

Additionally, Montag et al. (2021) dug into the psychology of TikTok use, and they found that UGT can easily be used to explain various behaviors users exhibit on the platform. They noted that TikTok users have self-reported that they use the app for purposes such as basic entertainment, creative expression, interpersonal interactions, and self-presentation (status maintenance). Each of these purposes coincides with one of the main categories presented by Katz et al. (1973). Bossen and Kottasz (2020) outlined that TikTok users primarily use the app to express themselves, create new social circles, and seek popularity. Often, these purposes for using the platform manifest themselves, following Shao's framework, as active participation and the creation of original content.

2. Methodology

2.1 Procedure

To obtain a diverse sample of the general population of social media users ages 15-21, respondents were recruited indirectly through Instagram and Snapchat stories, and directly by being sent an online questionnaire as a message directly to them or a social media group chat which they were a member of. The Instagram and Snapchat stories requested that social media users ages 15-21 complete the short questionnaire. This method of distribution allowed for the questionnaire responses to be taken between April 10, 2023, and April 21, 2023. The communities reached were primarily high school and university students based in the United States European Union, and United Kingdom countries.

2.2 Respondents

From the direct and indirect solicitations to complete the questionnaire, a total of 102 responded. All 102 respondents were social media users.

2.3 Operational Measures

The questionnaire was introduced with the following description of social media: “For the purposes of this questionnaire, social media is defined to be any online platform that allows you to create your own content, interact with the content of others, and facilitate the building of communities. Direct forms of online communication such as iMessage and FaceTime are not included in this definition of social media. This definition of social media is in line with that of The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2022)

Basic demographic information was gathered from respondents, including age, gender identity, level of education attained, current or most recent educational institution attended, national origin, and the education level of their parents. Items concerning subjective feelings

concerning social media were collected from Pew Research Center's 2018 study "Teens' Social Media Habits and Experiences" of young people's social media use and were phrased as self-reported assessments (i.e. "Does social media make you feel...?" with the responses being *yes; a lot, yes; a little, no; a little, and no; a lot*). Some questions were phrased as "Which of the following social media platforms...? (Select all that apply)" with the option to select multiple responses including *Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and None (of the platforms)*. In the case of these questions, there was also an *other* option where respondents could elect to submit any social media platforms that were not explicitly mentioned. Various questions from Pew's original questionnaire were eliminated due to irrelevance to the research question and to make the questionnaire less time-consuming for participants. The questions were also reorganized and given in a different order for the sake of convenience for the respondents.

Additionally, original questions were crafted to gather data concerning social media usage that specifically related to the Uses and Gratifications theory. These questions were phrased as self-reported assessments (i.e. "Which of the following social media platforms do you use for *insert category of gratification as specified by Katz et al. (1973)*?" with the option to select multiple options, which were *Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and None (of the platforms)*. The order of the answer options was randomized. In the case of these questions, there was also an *other* option where respondents could elect to submit any social media platforms that were not explicitly mentioned. Respondents could also refuse to answer the question, which would be interpreted as if they had selected *None (of the platforms)*. Immediately following each individual question of this nature was another question inquiring "Does social media fulfill the prior purpose for you more now than it did prior to the pandemic?." The answer options to this were yes, no, and I do not use social media for the purpose specified in the prior question. The nature of asking respondents

directly about the social media platforms they use for various uses and gratifications invokes the key idea of the Uses and Gratifications theory that users are active and cognizant participants in their consumption of media.

Pew Research Center's questionnaire was created by Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang specifically for their 2018 survey which was conducted online and by telephone from March 7, 2018, to April 10, 2018. Their survey included individuals ages 13-17 and aimed to gain insight into the experiences teens had with social media. The original questionnaire was exceptional for this purpose; the questions were easy to understand and concise.

While Common Sense Media is a leading nonprofit organization aimed at providing information to improve the lives of families and children, the original questionnaire created to gather data for their survey is not publicly available. Due to this, questions were reverse-engineered based on their report. For example, Common Sense found that out of four forms of communication (in-person, texting, social media, and video-chatting) teens, on average, valued in-person communication less in 2018 than in 2012. Based on this information, the prompt "Please rank how you prefer the following forms of communication from 1 (most valued) to 4 (least valued): in person, texting, social media, video-chatting" was created with the intention of gathering the same information while using neutral wording? This same concept for reverse-engineering neutral questions was followed for all of those that relate to Common Sense's survey.

The final questionnaire used was first sent to a close colleague for a second proofread and any helpful modifications to questions for the sake of clarity and neutrality to avoid methodological errors. Following all necessary adjustments and revisions, the survey was shared on the author's personal social media accounts (Instagram and Snapchat) in addition to being shared with peers in cities such as Akron (Ohio, United States), Madrid (Spain) Frankfurt (Germany), Prague (Czech Republic), New York City (New York, United States),

and Washington, DC (United States). The entire questionnaire took each respondent an average of 3-5 minutes to complete.

Due to the simplicity of this survey, only basic descriptive statistics such as measures of central tendency (mean/average), measures of frequency (percent), and measures of dispersion (range) were necessary. The questionnaire was created on Google Forms, which is fully integrated with Google Sheets and facilitated the analysis of the data. Both Common Sense's and Pew's results were required to use more complicated methods of finding the results that this study is able to find in a simpler manner due to their dealing with various variables (race, ethnicity, income, etc.).

2.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the sample size (102) was relatively small compared to the original surveys that guided this survey. Along the same vein, the survey was created specifically for this bachelor's thesis, so the samples from this exact survey are the only of its kind. However, the questions borrowed from Pew Research Center's 2018 survey and Common Sense Media's 2018 survey could be considered to be somewhat cross-sectional. Additionally, due to financial and time constraints, and convenience sampling methods (distributing the questionnaire on personal social media accounts) the survey sample was not able to be as random as the originals.

Furthermore, the original surveys that this thesis is largely based on populations ages 13-17, while this specific survey studied those ages 15-21. While people who are currently 15-21 were within the age range of 13-17 at the onset of the pandemic, they no longer are, so these results may not be entirely accurate as direct comparisons to the original surveys. Due to the recent nature of the pandemic, they are forced to be treated as direct comparisons, but this critique is acknowledged. Ideally, future studies into this area would include a

longitudinal study of how young people's preferences for using social media for communication with peers continues to change post-pandemic.

Finally, the survey is based entirely on self-reports. Inherently, this makes each response susceptible to respondent biases that do not reflect reality in some cases. It is worth noting that as the survey largely questions respondents' feelings, the only accurate manner to measure subjective feelings are with self-reported data, and that self-reported data is integral to the thesis' theoretical framework. This study does not claim to establish causality between any of the variables presented. The data only depicts correlations and associations, and therefore, it is not possible to infer a causal relationship between the onset of the pandemic and any variables, only the perceptions of the respondents.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 *The Hypothesis*

Individuals will both objectively use social media more and perceive their present selves as being more dependent on social media for maintaining their social connections and meeting the various uses and gratifications specified in the survey than they were prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2 *The Data*

As previously mentioned, the aim of the survey was to both build upon recent research into the social media habits of young people and to assess the perceptions of these individuals in their reasons for using various social media platforms.

As the survey began with the demographic characteristics of respondents: age, gender, education level, and national origins, these are able to provide a general overview of both individuals and the survey sample as a whole. The age variable could possibly shed light on any differences in perceptions surrounding social media between adolescents of different ages. Gender was also necessary to determine if there are differences in how boys and girls generally feel and interact with social media. Education level was essential to evaluate possible differences in social media usage and perceptions that are due to the education level of individuals (Ex. an 18-year-old who is still in high school could possibly use social media differently and have different perceptions than an 18-year-old who is already studying in university). In my own personal experience, I used social media much differently and felt differently about it when I was in high school (ages 15-17) than I have since being in university after the onset of the pandemic (ages 17-19). In conversing with others in this age

range, the same was true for many, making this a valuable insight.

Out of 102 individuals between the ages of 15 and 21, their specific ages are as follows: 15 (19.6%), 16 (10.8%), 17 (9.8%), 18 (13.7%), 19 (14.7%), 20 (19.6%), and 21 (11.8%). See Figure 1 for visual representation. Younger adolescents (between the ages of 15 and 17) made up 59.8% of the respondents, while older adolescents (between the ages of 18 and 21) made up 40.2% of the respondents.

As expected, many more girls responded than boys. In total, 66 girls (64.7%), 30 boys (29.4%), and 6 non-binary and gender-diverse individuals (5.9%) completed the questionnaire. See Figure 2 for visual representation. As has been noted by Pew Research Center, girls, and boys in much of the world use social media at similar rates, so the fact that many more girls participated in the survey is not detrimental to the reliability of results concerning objective social media use (use as average screen time). Additionally, the majority of respondents were from the United States (63.7%), with the next largest group being from the European Union or the United Kingdom (13.7%). It was expected that the majority of participants due to the methods of dispersion of the questionnaire itself. Other regions represented include Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Canada, and Non-EU European countries. See Figure 3 for a visual representation of the national origins of all respondents.

Most respondents are currently enrolled in either high school or university. In total, 45.1% have completed some high school (currently attending high school), 49% have completed some university (either left prior to degree completion or are currently attending university), while only 2.9% of respondents have completed high school without continuing on to the university level and another 2.9% have completed university. See Figure 4 for visual representation. These participants came from a diverse group of high schools in the United States and European Union (primarily the state of Ohio, and Prague, Czech Republic) and

university students from all regions mentioned in the “national origins” information.

Figure 1: Respondent Age

Respondent Age

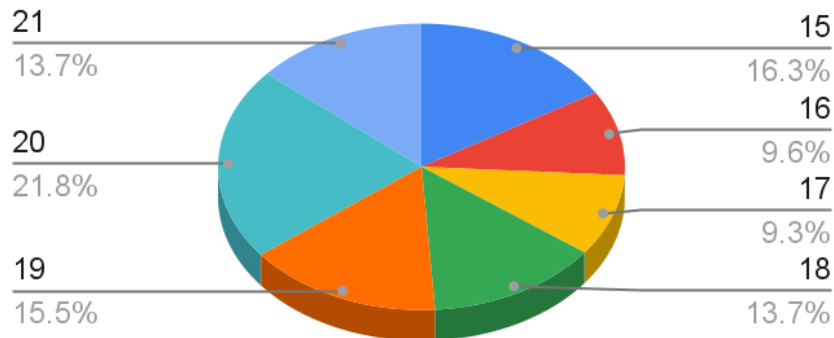


Figure 2: Respondent Gender

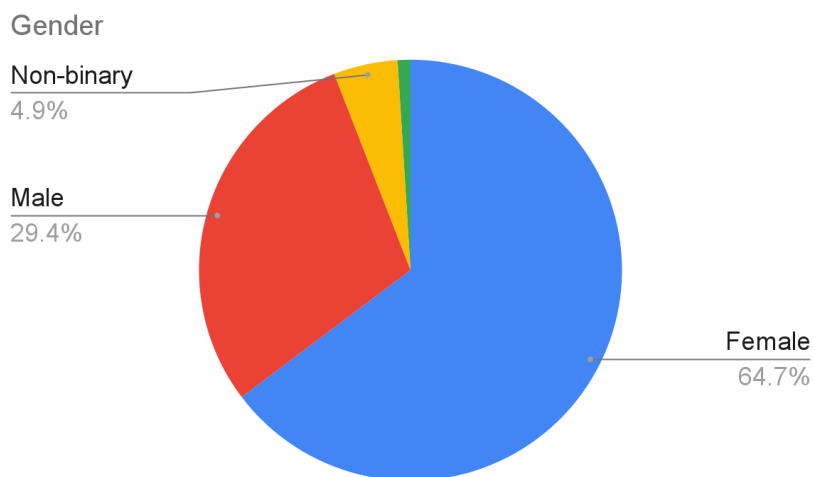


Figure 3: Respondent National Origins

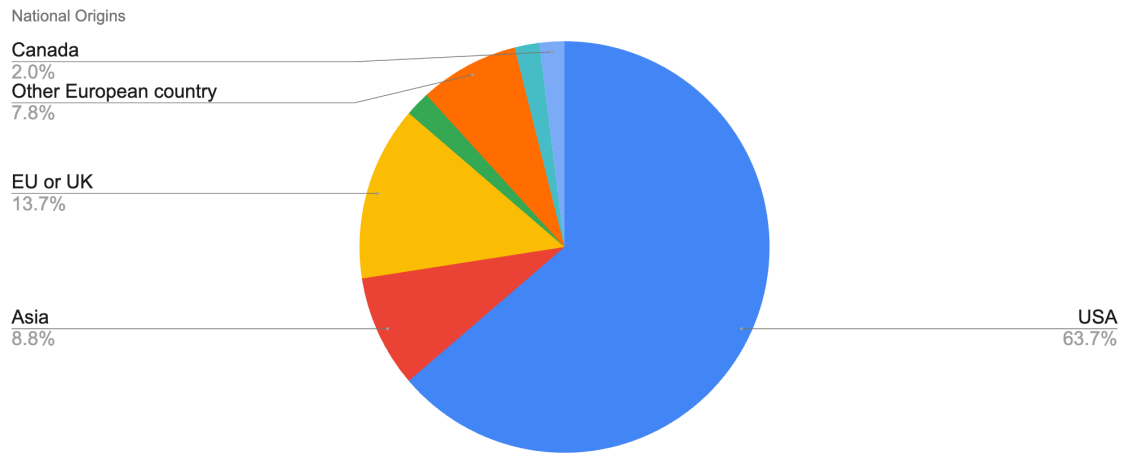
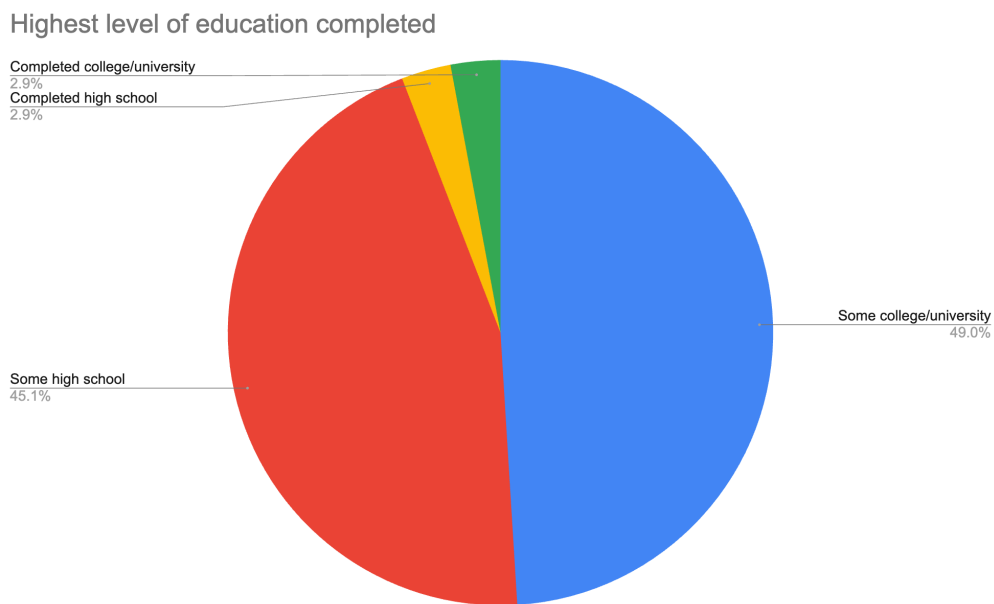


Figure 4: Respondent Education Level



When questioned about what specific social media platforms they used, Instagram was the most popular answer, with 93.1% of respondents being active users. Other popular platforms included Snapchat (73.5%), TikTok (64.7%), YouTube (85.3%), and Facebook (32.4%). Furthermore, multiple respondents chose to write in additional platforms including Pinterest, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, and more. See Figure 5 for visual representation. With

49% of respondents reporting using Instagram the most out of all social media platforms, it is the most popular in this sample, followed by Tiktok (26.5%) and Snapchat (14.7%). See figure 6 for visual representation. Compared to the 2018 survey by Common Sense Media which found 41% of teens used Snapchat the most and 22% used Instagram the most, this original survey found that 49% of respondents used Instagram the most, 26% used TikTok the most, and only 14.7% using Snapchat the most (Rideout and Robb, 2018). In the four years between surveys, Instagram has, for one reason or another, become much more popular than Snapchat; this is possibly due to its frequent updates with new features allowing it to stay more relevant than Snapchat. Additionally, as previously noted, TikTok has achieved unprecedented success in its popularity since 2018. It was also found that the vast majority of respondents use social media frequently; when asked, 97% of respondents stated that they use social media more than once daily. See Figure 7 for visual representation. This is a notable increase from Rideout and Robb's (2018) findings that 70% of teens used social media more than once daily. When questioned explicitly about this, 72.2% of respondents stated that they felt that they had to use social media to replace the in-person interactions that they could not experience during the height of the pandemic. See Figure 7 for the full visual breakdown of responses to this question. With the supermajority of teens and young adults feeling social media was necessary at this time, an increase in social media use frequency is understandable.

Out of 102 responses, on average, teens and young adults spent 5.7 hours on their phone daily. The phones of all responses had a function that could track and break down their phone usage, so it is highly reliable that this average is accurate. Furthermore, of those same respondents, 72.2% report that greater than half of their daily screen time is spent using social media. See Figure 8 for a visual representation of complete responses. Consequently, on average, teens are spending at least 2 hours and 48 minutes on any given social media

platform per day. This did not go unnoticed by teens, however, who generally feel that their daily screen time is higher than they would prefer. Greater than two-thirds (67.3%) of respondents say that their screen time is higher than they would like, and 70.3% of the same respondents say that they use social media more than they prefer. Additionally, it was found that this demographic uses social media more now, in April of 2023 than it did prior to the pandemic; Only 19.8% of respondents say that they do not use social media any more now than they did prior to the onset of the pandemic. See Figure 9 for a visual representation of responses.

This disparity between respondents' feelings toward their social media usage and their actual reported social media usage is significant. As previously mentioned, Rideout and Robb (2018) noted that nearly three out of four teens think that technology companies manipulate users into spending more time on their personal devices. Many also noticed that social media distracted them from a variety of aspects of their real life, such as doing homework, spending time with people in person, and even sleeping. Similarly, in this original study, only 12.7% of teens and young adults feel highly in control of the content that they consume on social media platforms. The vast majority felt somewhat in control, with a minority (7.8%) reporting that they do not feel in control of their media consumption at all. See Figure 10 for a visual representation of all answers. This finding implies that teens are aware of and believe that technology companies manipulate them and other users into spending more time on their platforms, which is consistent with Rideout and Robb's findings even if they cannot cite specific examples such as the previously mentioned "study" on users' mood that was conducted by Facebook. This study actually found a 4% uptick in this belief from 72% according to Rideout and Robb in 2018 to 76% as of April 2023. While this is a relatively small change, it could possibly be attributed to or correlated with the further development of social media platforms in an effort to prolong the time users spend on their platforms at the

sacrifice of other important activities and obligations in users' lives.

Figure 5: Social Media Platforms Used

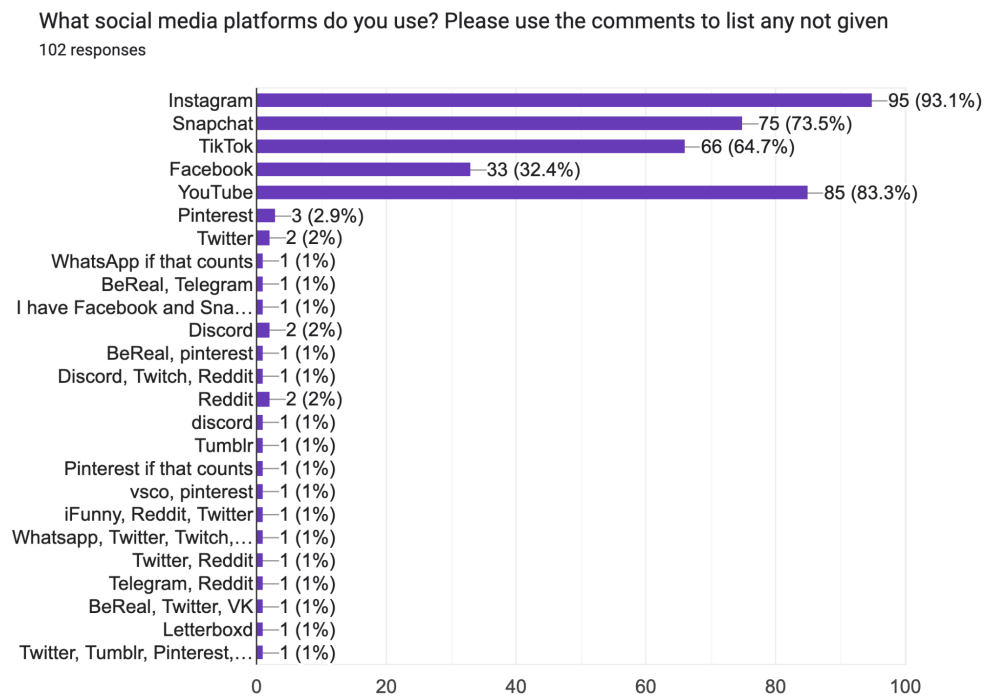


Figure 6: Most Used Social Media Platform

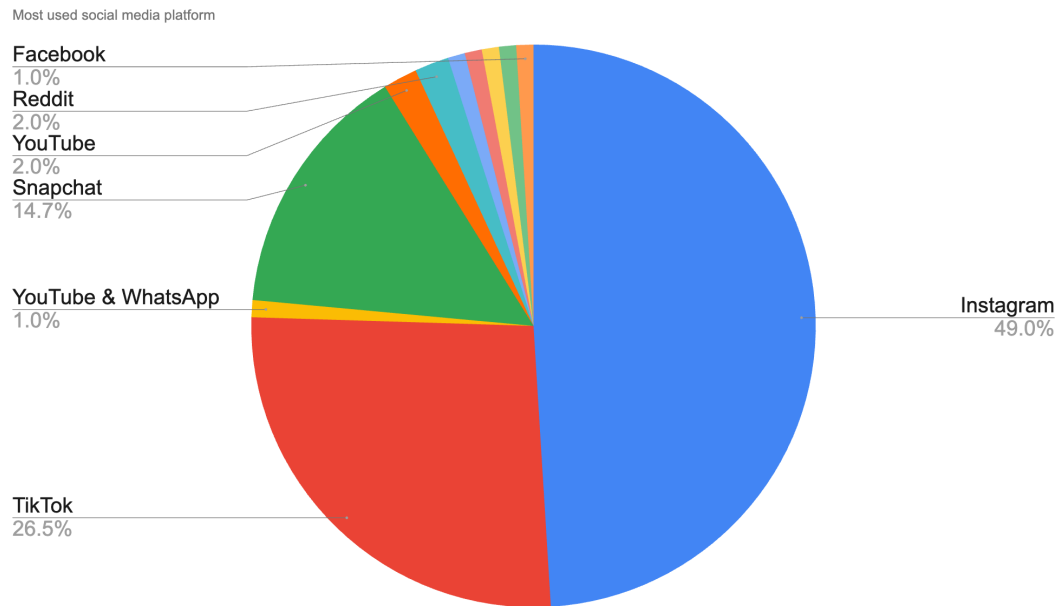


Figure 7: Frequency of Social Media Use

Frequent social media use (using at least one social media platform more than once daily)

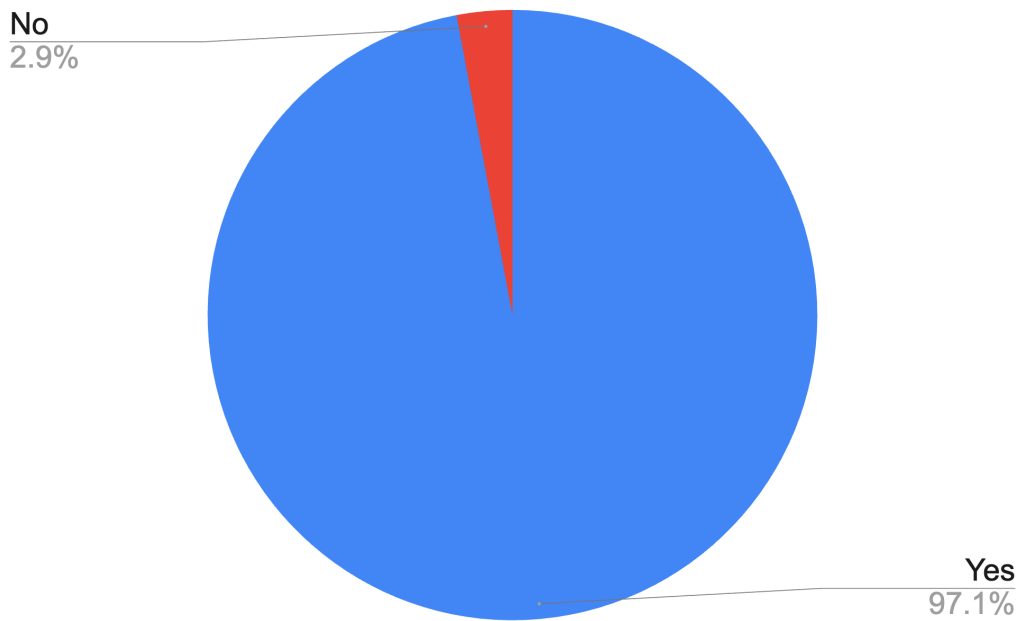


Figure 8: Average Daily Screen Time Spent on Social Media

Daily average screen time spent using social media?

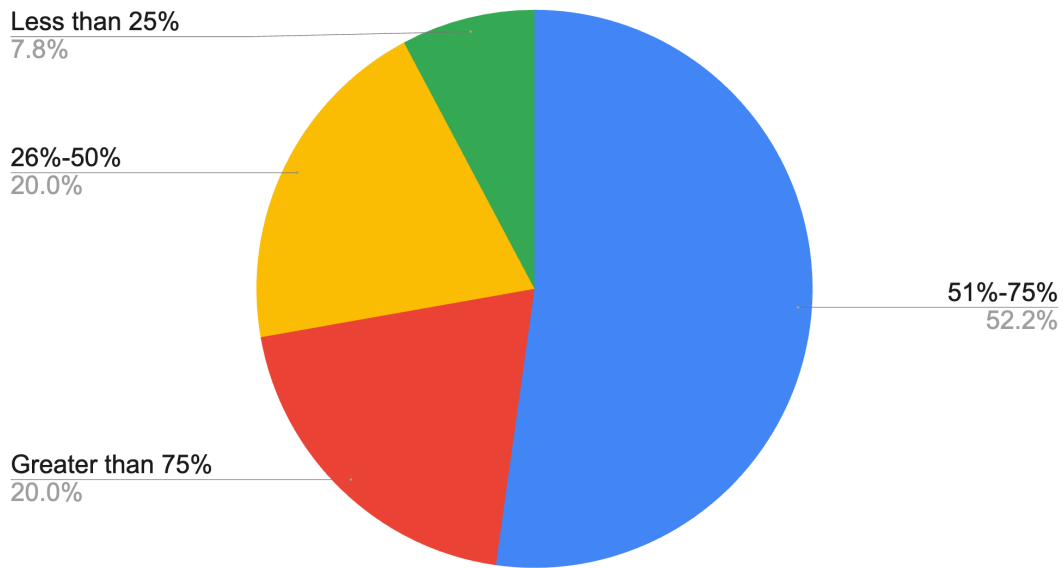


Figure 9: Current Social media Usage Compared to Prior to the Pandemic

In general, do you use social media more now than you did prior to the onset of the pandemic?

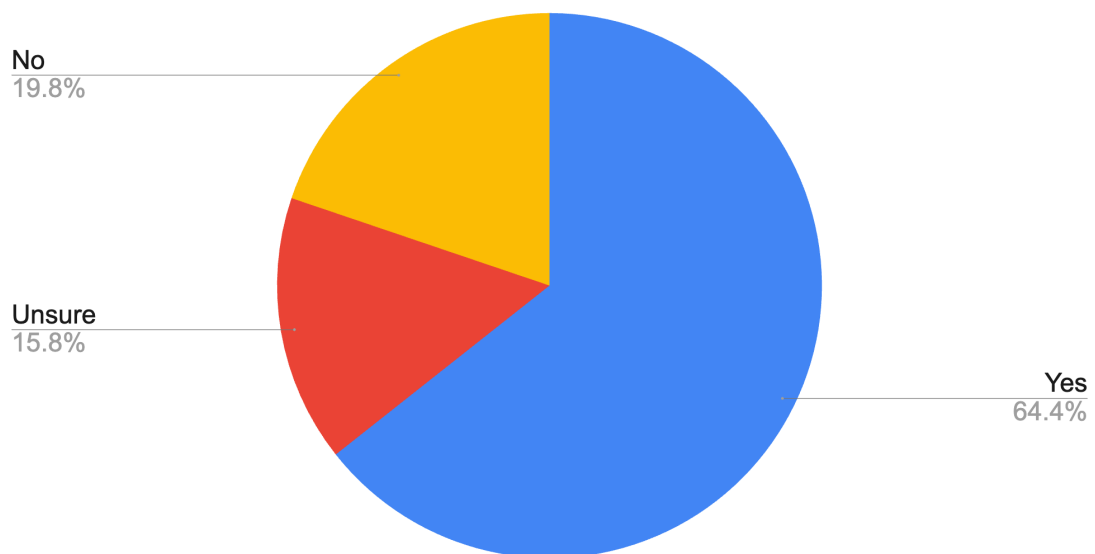
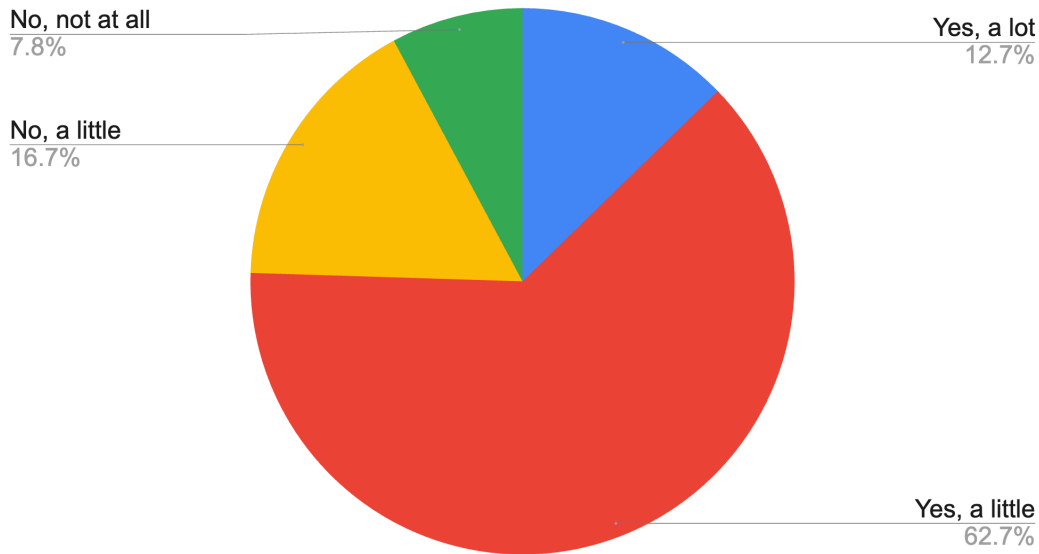


Figure 10: Perception of Control of Social Media Content Consumed

Do you feel in control of the content that you consume on social media?



The next section of the questionnaire focused specifically on the experiences and feelings teens had in their social media usage through the lens of the five UGT need groupings specified by Katz et al. (1973): Cognitive needs, affective needs, integrative needs, social contact; and disconnection.

When questioned about their behavior in using social media to stay informed and educated about any topic, nearly seven out of every ten respondents use Instagram for this purpose. Close to half of the same respondents use Tiktok (47.5%) and Youtube (46.5%). Respondents were allowed to select multiple responses in addition to writing in their own submissions, so it is possible that some use multiple social media platforms for this purpose. Refer to figure 11 for a more specific visual breakdown of the results. Additionally, 73.5% of respondents report that they use a social media platform for this purpose more now than they did prior to the pandemic.

Instagram also proves to be popular for meeting the affective needs of young individuals; again, nearly 70% of respondents report using Instagram to view either aesthetically pleasing or emotionally gratifying content. Snapchat and TikTok are once again the second and third most popular spots for this category (38.4% and 35.4%) with a small

minority using Facebook and Youtube and 10.1% using no social media platform at all. Again, respondents were allowed to select multiple responses in addition to writing in their own submissions. Refer to Figure 12 for a full visual view of all answers. 62.7% of respondents report that their social media platform of choice fulfills these needs for them now more than it did prior to the pandemic. With every respondent reporting that they use at least one form of social media for entertainment, Youtube (76.5%), Instagram (61.8%), and TikTok (60.8%) were the most frequently used. Interestingly, Facebook, which was originally a social media platform created specifically for young people, was not particularly popular. Less than 6% use Facebook for entertainment. Out of all of these respondents, 70.6% report that they use any social media platform for entertainment now more than they did prior to the pandemic. See Figure 13 for a visual representation of the results. Instagram was by far the most popular platform for maintaining existing social connections, with more than 80% of respondents using the platform for the purpose. Snapchat is also frequently used for this purpose, with 58.8% of respondents agreeing. See Figure 14 for a full breakdown of answers to this question. Both of these platforms have easily accessible and highly marketed direct message functions, so this outcome is expected. Additionally, 63.7% of respondents report that they use their platform of choice to maintain social connections now more than they did prior to the pandemic. With slightly more than 30% of respondents saying that they do not use their platform of choice more now than they did prior to the pandemic, it is worth noting this not-insignificant group of dissenters. Social media is also extremely popular for those seeking disconnection from their real life, which about 53% of respondents reporting that they use at least one of the following platforms for this need: Instagram, TikTok, and Youtube. All three platforms offer short form content in the form of videos that are typically under 30 seconds long; Instagram does so in the form of Reels videos, Youtube has its own Shorts section, and TikTok gained its popularity based on videos in this format. All of these

sections on the different platforms are generally extremely similar, and with much of the content created being recycled onto all three platforms, it appears to largely come down to personal preference on which respondents' use. Youtube is the only one of these platforms which commonly supports long-form videos (those that are longer than 15 minutes), which can also make it particularly popular for mindless and passive media consumption.

Additionally, a full two-thirds of participants say they use social media for some form of disconnection more now than they did prior to the pandemic.

Figure 11: Social Media Used to Stay Informed or Educated

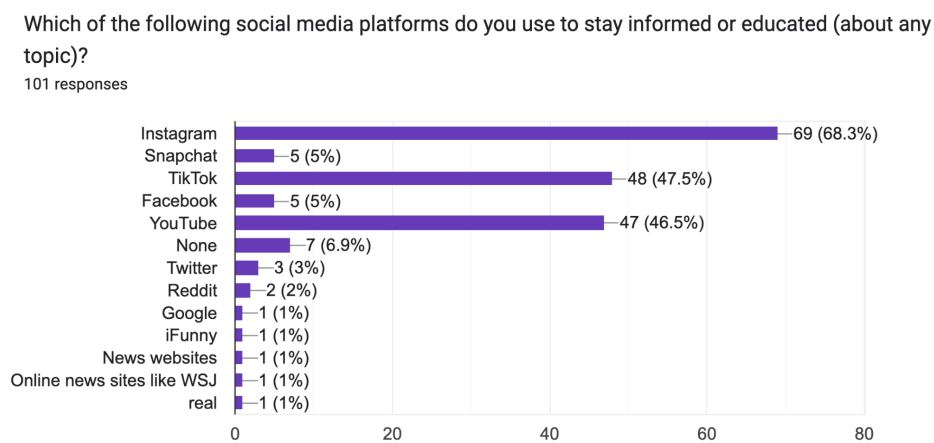


Figure 12: Social Media Used for Aesthetic or Emotional Gratification

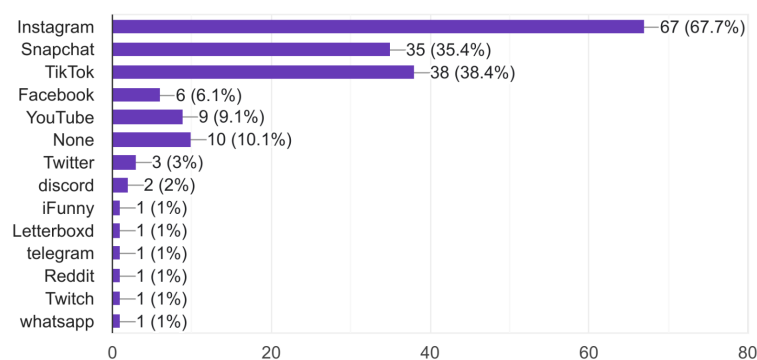
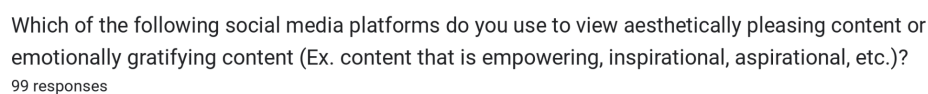


Figure 13: Social Media Used for Entertainment

Which of the following social media platforms do you use for entertainment?

102 responses

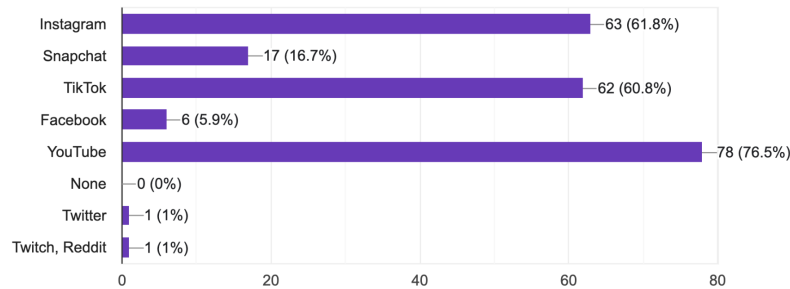


Figure 14: Social Media Used to Maintain Social Connections and/or Status

Which of the following social media platforms do you use to maintain social connections and/or status?

102 responses

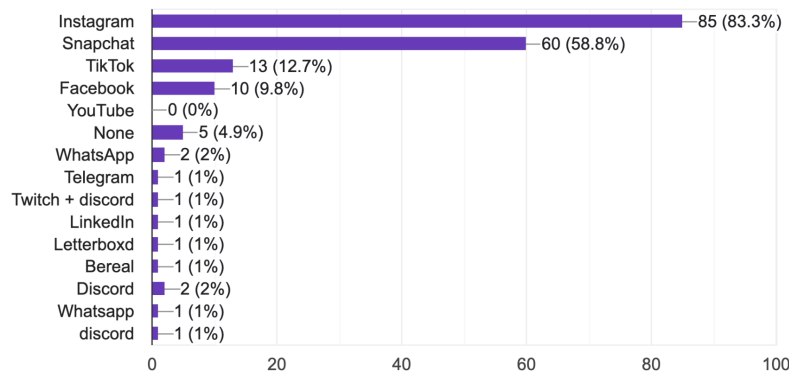
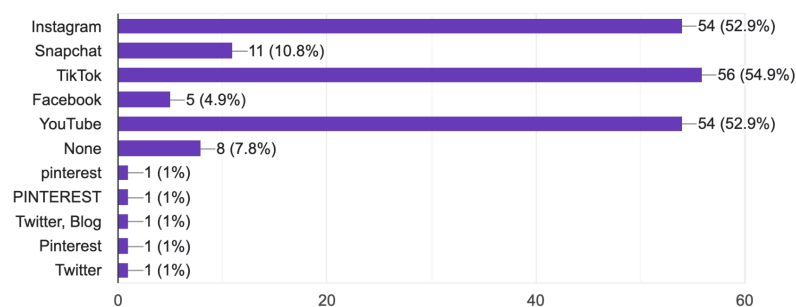


Figure 15: Social Media Used for Disconnection

Which of the following social media platforms do you use to disconnect when you are stressed or emotionally distressed (including but not limited to m...videos for distraction, etc.) (select all that apply)

102 responses



Out of all 102 participants, nearly 60% reported that they have online friends (a friend that they first met online). This is a drastic difference from the Pew Research Center's 2018 finding that only 15% of participants at that time had an online friend. Similarly, almost 60% of the same 102 respondents said that they use social media to find friends and communities that are not available to them in person. Much like Pew's 2018 survey, they commonly reported being in online communities based on hobbies, humor, and pop culture. Furthermore, 58.4% said that they discovered or became more active in at least one of these online groups during the pandemic. Teens are also aware of the changes in their behavior concerning social media; 53.5% said that they use social media in a somewhat different way than they did prior to the onset of the pandemic. All of these findings point in the direction of physical isolation contributing to these young people using other avenues of social interaction to make up for it. Many respondents also elected to specify how they use social media differently now; multiple state that they post more often in public and private manners and have felt a compulsion to use their phones and more social media platforms than they did prior to their physical isolation. To solidify this conclusion, more than 75% of teens and young adults say that they felt that they had to use social media to replace many of their in-person interactions during the height of the pandemic. Over 70% also said that they primarily used social media to stay in touch with friends when they could not physically interact with them.

From the findings that teens and young adults felt pressure to use social media to maintain their existing connections and create new ones during the pandemic combined with the majority of them saying that they spend too much time on their phones and on social media, a logical conclusion would be that they would make more time for interacting with friends face-to-face. But this does not appear to be the case. 59.4% of participants say that to this day, they do not spend as much time in person with their friends as they would like; they

cite multiple reasons for this, such as being busy and that it is just easier to stay connected on social media. Despite this, when asked to rank social media (any platform), video-chatting, in-person, and texting as their ideal and most valued forms of communication, 76.7% ranked in-person communication as their first preference. Rideout and Robb (2018) found that between 2012 and 2018 in-person communication declined in favor among teens going from 49% of teens primarily preferring it to only 32% (2018). This drastic increase in the preference for face-to-face communication can likely be attributed to the scarcity of it that young people have experienced by 2023. Teens in the past were likely less inclined to prefer this form of interaction because they had probably gone only a weekend or two without seeing friends in person; on the other hand, young people today now know what it is like to not be able to see your friends or acquaintances for many months at a time.

4. Conclusion

This survey of the social media preferences and experiences of young people today has been an enlightening experience and allows for the original research question to finally be answered; based on the findings of this study, it appears that young people in general have adapted their lives since the onset of the pandemic to include the use of social media in their common forms of communication even more than ever before. On the other hand, there is also clear evidence that this group still deeply values face-to-face communication and actually prefers it. This finding is completely in line with Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas' 1973 finding that "for all needs examined, the non-media sources (combined) were deemed more gratifying than mass media." (p. 19). Unfortunately for many of these individuals, it appears that social media has become so pervasive in everyday life that it not only distracts from important activities, but it also forces them to include it in other facets of life more than they would prefer.

As shown in the results concerning the uses and gratifications sought and obtained in using social media, these young people are highly aware of their motivations and can effectively express them when prompted, which is a pillar of U&G theory. When considering each of the five specified need groupings as a whole, Instagram was the clear winner; perhaps this is due to its many features that allow the platform to cater to many different preferences that individuals have. Additionally, Instagram is still one of the most popular social media platforms in the world, which has allowed many people to be highly exposed to it. This combination fulfills the four main factors that affect the media use of all people. From all of this, it has become clear that the original assumptions and ideas surrounding U&G theory are still relevant today in an era of unique mass media in the form of social media.

The findings from this study are highly relevant not only to the demographic of teenagers and young adults ages 15-21 but also to parents, educators, mentors, and those more concerned with the feelings and well-being of minors. A main key takeaway from the information found in this thesis is that it is imperative that we as a society take time for the consumption of any media at appropriate times without letting it dominate our lives. Unfortunately, many young people already feel overwhelmed by the presence of social media in every aspect of their lives, so finding and creating resources, outlets, and changes to erect new methods of bringing back more real life into our lives.

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