



Regular Article

Social media wellbeing: Perceived wellbeing amidst social media use in Norway

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social media use and balance
 Social media dependence
 Social media reliance
 Wellbeing and social media
 Social media solutions
 Social media communication

ABSTRACT

Social media use is a topical issue and raises several concerns including online comparison and social media fatigue, which have implications on the perceived wellbeing of users. Thus, this study explores how university students in Norway perceive their wellbeing in respect to their social media usage. To answer this, the study employs a qualitative approach by drawing from a set of 15 in-depth interviews ascertaining how informants perceive their social media use, what 'balance' means to their social media connectedness, and how it impacts their subjective sense of wellbeing. The research draws on the theory of mediatization as well as the uses and gratification theory. The mode of analysis rests on an interpretative phenomenological analysis to place findings within the larger context of the role of social media in the daily lives of users. This paper makes a conceptual and empirical contribution. Conceptually, it adds value to how scholarship can theorize wellbeing within social media contexts. Whereas empirically it illuminates how users perceive their wellbeing within the social media landscape and the solutions they propose to balance social media use.

1. Introduction

Swiping, scrolling, and navigating through social media platforms is the new norm. A possibility of continuous connectivity and prompts used by platforms (Lupinacci, 2021) along with notifications turn into constant stimulus and mini awards to the brain making digital impulses invasive. While scholars discuss some of these negative effects of social media independently, such as, social media fatigue (Bright & Logan, 2018; Dhir et al., 2018) and social media comparison (Talwar et al., 2019), they do not interrogate all of these in cohesion from the vantage point of users' wellbeing.

Like a double-edged sword, social media use can be either helpful or harmful depending on the purpose it serves for the users (Widdicks, 2020). Having said so, there exists limited information on the negative effects of social media use which are unfavorable to wellbeing (Baumer, 2013). Moreover, while scholars agree that an over-dependence on social media communication brings along dilemmas for individuals, research on the negative effects of social media use remains fragmented. For example, some scholars suggest that due to communicating digitally, face-to-face human contact is diminished (Coget et al., 2002; Macit et al., 2018). Others center on "the over consumption of social media, increased isolation, and a false sense of connection with online users" (Baumer, 2013, p. 72). Likewise, the fear of missing out by abstaining

from using social media use leads to addictive inclinations (Moore & Craciun, 2021). Whilst social networking sites trigger online comparison amongst users (Vogel et al., 2014), platform creators remain aware that its products are harmful to users, as detailed by former Facebook employee, Frances Haugen. Yet, owing to the anticipation for pleasure (Sapolsky, 2007) as well as unrestricted access to social media platforms, users may remain entwined (Macit et al., 2018). Bringing these aspects together can help to widen the scope of understanding the impressions of social media engagement on users.

Studies depict that the COVID-19 pandemic created an impact on mental health, overall wellbeing, and perceived quality of life among individuals in different ways and the high usage of social media during this time was associated with these factors (Geirdal et al., 2021). Also, the pandemic amplified social media dependence, especially amongst university students (García-Peñalvo, 2021). Specifically in Norway, university students are not only digitally apt, but their social lives are also partly led within the realm of digital apps. Moreover, student lives are becoming increasingly digital, not least through distant leaning tools brought on by the pandemic. Scholars have begun to ask questions about what this does to users' media consumption in Norway, for instance looking at digital media detox (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019; Ytre-Arne, 2016). Although theoretically a detox movement proposal may appear as a solution, in practice the feasibility of detoxing from social media,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100436>

Received 5 October 2022; Received in revised form 11 January 2023; Accepted 2 February 2023

Available online 21 February 2023

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especially for university students, remains debatable.

Rather than taking the vantage point of abstinence, detox or switch-off as ways to deal with social media overload and dependence, this research focuses on uncovering solutions proposed by students to address the problems of social media use and whether there can be a balanced approach. This paper acknowledges that digital media use has its advantages, while remaining sensitive to the negative impacts that use, non-use, or overuse, especially concerning social media platforms, may have on students' perception of their own wellbeing. Particularly, it addresses the following research question: How do university students in Norway perceive their wellbeing in respect to their social media usage?

To address this research question, the paper assumes a user-centric perspective to synthesize wellbeing and social media wellbeing on the theory of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013) and uses and gratification (Katz et al., 1973; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The study rests upon 15 in-depth interviews of university students in Oslo and Stavanger, Norway. The following section presents a literature review, followed by the theoretical framework, methods, research findings and discussion.

2. Literature review

The literature review theoretically addresses the construction and articulation of wellbeing as well as social media wellbeing. It also highlights gaps and disagreements in the field which revolve around problems of social media dependencies. Further, it questions proposals such as a complete digital abstinence which can augment the fear of missing out amongst users.

2.1. Conceptual framework and key definitions of wellbeing

While there are many definitions of wellbeing, studies show that wellbeing is a subjective phenomenon, based on one's personal assessment of life. Literature broadly frames the concept of overall wellbeing as being happy and satisfied with life experiences. However, scholars argue that it is difficult to get wellbeing right (Vernon, 2014). For instance, wellbeing grounded in hedonism centers on the presence of the positive and the absenteeism of the negative (Quandt & Frischlich, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which can be an unrealistic indicator to gauge wellbeing. Whereas, eudemonic wellbeing is theorized in different ways, such as living a meaningful life and fulfilling one's central needs (Quandt & Frischlich, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). While a state of always feeling good is a tall order to fulfill pragmatically, articulating wellbeing as optimizing positive feelings while minimizing or constructively managing the negatives can serve hypothetically.

Descriptions of wellbeing mostly focus on life satisfaction, happiness, quality of life and pleasure. Wellbeing research points out that physical wellbeing, emotional wellbeing as well as developmental activities are essential spheres impacting one's quality of life (Felce & Perry, 1995). While life satisfaction is an indicator of wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), the main motivation of humans is to seek pleasure and happiness along with having "an overall appreciation of life" (Veenhoven, 2010, p. 329).

The central idea of wellbeing is to create a harmonious flow in all areas of life (Smith & Puczko, 2008). Wellbeing is inherent within the experience of an individual (Diener, 1984) and is thus "subjective or perceptual" (Smith & Puczko, 2008, p. 52). Although wellbeing consists of numerous factors, health remains one of them (Diener et al., 2010). Wellbeing focuses on achieving peak health and the integration of mind-body-spirit (Myers et al., 2000). This synthesis can bridge the gap between the physical and mental aspects while offering a holistic sense of wellbeing. Belief systems may also play a role in how one appraises their own wellbeing (Inglehart, 2010).

Contrarily, one of the obstacles in achieving wellbeing is unhappiness. Unhappiness diminishes self-esteem, indicating that a good mood has a relationship with one's sense of self (Diener, 1984). Social exclusion also tends to reduce happiness and a sense of wellbeing (Sjåstad et al., 2021). Whereas, a strong sense of belonging is a key factor in

feeling happier (Malone et al., 2012). People can achieve happier states by improving their external circumstances (Inglehart, 2010). In addition, choosing wellness enhancing activities while striving to achieve a balance between diverse aspects of oneself – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, is essential for a holistic lifestyle (Smith & Puczko, 2008). Another way to achieve wellbeing is through relishing daily activities (Tse et al., 2021). Being present-oriented and focusing on the task at hand, rather than being anxious towards the future or fixated on the past, keeps one in a state of flow while contributing to greater wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014). The next section of the literature review focuses on wellbeing within the specific context of social media use.

2.2. Wellbeing in the social media context

As highlighted above in the wellbeing literature, scholars have wide-ranging perspectives on what is wellbeing. Although, this literature addresses diverse realms of wellbeing, such as physical, emotional, social, and spiritual, it does so in no specific context and without considering the mediatization of life. However, this broad conceptualization of wellbeing presents a gap. Therefore, this section addresses this gap by turning the focus of the paper to a context-specific discourse of wellbeing within the backdrop of social media.

Burgeoning research on wellbeing in the digital and social media context conceptualizes it as the balance that users experience to being connected digitally (Abeele, 2020). What this balance means needs further exploration. Moreover, social media is a tool that not only facilitates connections with other users (Ytre-Arne, 2016), but also offers an opportunity to emulate celebrity culture and frame a mediatic world that centers around the individual (Macit et al., 2018), while providing a stage to draw comparisons (Talwar et al., 2019). This polarity of social media use illustrates that while some scholars regard it as beneficial especially in relation to widening communication avenues, its negative effects also take the limelight (Muringani & Noll, 2021). Although access to multiple networking sites, participatory media practices and platform hopping can offer users a sense of having several options to virtually socialize, this is debatable.

On the positive side, social media platforms portray themselves as paths for networking and communication (Cheung et al., 2011). Moreover, they may offer a perceived sense of social and informational support (Kross et al., 2021). Likewise, social media use may compensate for the lack of real world connection for individuals dealing with illness and offer them support to some degree (Ytre-Arne, 2016). In such scenarios, the usage of digital apps may assist in "communication and identity management" (Ytre-Arne, 2016, p. 68). Also, some affirm that social media use depicts a positive association with wellbeing, especially during the times of pandemic when interpersonal communication has been restrictive (Ostic et al., 2021).

On the negative side, research shows that an overdependence on digital devices, in general, can make people unhappy (Dhir et al., 2018). Additionally, the fear of missing out is often held responsible for the growth in addictive social media tendencies (Moore & Craciun, 2021), while posing a threat to wellbeing by triggering health issues such as sleep deprivation and decreased output amongst users (Hayran & Anik, 2021). Findings from a recent study conducted on social media fatigue depict that constantly being online can have negative effects, such as triggering exhaustion amongst adolescents which then elevates anxiety (Dhir et al., 2018). Dependence on a medium may be due to various psychological and social factors, such as anxiety and lack of contentment which can contribute to excessive digital usage (Rubin, 2009). Studies also show that an increase in digital consumption amongst university students during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to psychological and psychiatric disorders amongst some people (Gómez-Galán et al., 2020).

Owing to social influence and a herd mentality (Aral, 2014), immersing in social media platforms may seem to amplify amongst users. Immersion is deep involvement in momentary experiences (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). However, immersing excessively in social media

newsfeeds can have negative consequences. For example, doom scrolling which refers to a media practice where social media users relentlessly seek out and read negative information in their newsfeeds about catastrophes, disasters, and tragic events (Sharma et al., 2022) can have negative effects (Price et al., 2022). The constant urge to scroll can contribute to weakening users' digital immunity which entails de-conditioning from digital impetuses (Hilbert, 2021). Likewise, issues such as online trolling that reflect offline harassment behaviors are unfavorable to mental health (Craker & March 2016). Especially, the lack of privacy on social media platforms exposes certain vulnerabilities of users which may be used by trolls to target them (Phillips, 2015). This may have a significant impact on the users' psychological wellbeing as they may take online trolls seriously. Moreover, having continuous access to social media platforms raises other concerns about users' wellbeing, such as information overload (Andrejevic, 2013) and connection overload (LaRose et al., 2014). Researchers point that every user may have a distinct sensitivity to the effects of social media use (Beyens et al., 2020).

Evidently, in contemporary societies, social media consumption is increasing giving way to several difficulties. To combat these, discourse on digital disconnection from the overuse of social media makes headway. The stress of being connected all the time is a factor that is prompting researchers to suggest digital detox and employ self-monitoring measures to refrain from over-using digital devices (More & First, 2018; Ytre-Arne, 2016). Other proposals include complete deactivation (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and temporary disconnection (Jorge, 2019). Amid the advice on how to detox digitally for a better life lay suggestions on connecting with nature, coloring and diverting attention to other activities (Goodin, 2017). Authors contend that turning away from technological devices may enhance happiness (Bratsberg & Moen, 2015) and be similar to the principles of mindfulness (Syvertsen & Enli, 2019).

Although complete inactivation may eliminate the negative aspects of social media use, it may also eliminate the good aspects (van Wezel et al., 2021). This may pose as a dilemma for users making it difficult for them to choose abstention from social media platforms. Similarly, in which contexts deactivation interventions may successfully work remains debatable while being conditional upon users' attitudes towards social media use (Abeele et al., 2022). For instance, users may become obsessed with social media, metaphorically addicted, or may feel guilty for overusing social media, thus creating a sense of unfitting behaviors that need to be fixed (Abeele et al., 2022).

Whilst researchers suggest some coping mechanisms such as mindfulness practices, and propose a possible link between digital detox and happiness (Baumer, 2013; Bratsberg & Moen, 2015; Syvertsen & Enli, 2019), the extent to which users choose to refrain from the use of media platforms can be influenced by forced digitalization (González-López et al., 2021), social media addiction and the dopamine loop which cycles around anticipation, anxiety and reward seeking behaviors (Macit et al., 2018). Whereas individual perception and social stimulus can also play a key role in how individuals assess their social media use. However, less is known on user perceptions on wellbeing within social media, especially in digital societies that offer free and unrestricted access to wireless networks.

3. Theoretical framework

The theories of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2013) and uses and gratification (Katz et al., 1973) provide an entry point to locating user perspectives in the realm of social media. Moreover, these theories help in understanding what kind of gratifications (if any) users derive from social media use.

3.1. Mediatization theory

Mediatization theory helps to understand how society as well as

individuals have transformed due to excessive influence of digital and social media (Hjarvard, 2013). Also, it explains the social change taking place due to mediatization of day-to-day life, viewed through four lenses – extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation (Schulz, 2004). Extension postulates that the functions of technology bridge the human communication gap by removing limitations of time and space. Technological advances ease access to connectivity amongst people. However, while technology makes connectivity easy, media involvement substitutes human connection with media activities. For example, people may choose to use cellphones or social media apps to communicate instead of meeting in person. Likewise, amalgamation depicts media activities merging and overlapping with non-media activities in everyday life. Such as, checking notifications while out at a party or reading social media newsfeeds while in the classroom illustrate how media use integrates into the mundane life. Moreover, accommodation reflects how various actors, such as politicians, sportspersons, movie producers, etc. adapt to media logic. For example, different actors utilize the power of media to gain publicity while media organizations expand viewership through them (Schulz, 2004). In this regard, media seems to share a mutually beneficial relationship with several establishments. Additionally, student lives are immersed in mediatic interactions. Scholars note that in the current scenario media users are not just living with media but they are living within media (Deuze, 2011). However, the negative implications of excessive assimilation of social media into daily life may accompany several problems for students, as discussed in this research. Adding mediatization to perceptions of social media use offers insight into how mediatized processes shape wellbeing, while unlocking individual insights into social media use as well as discovering avenues to overcome problems associated with mediatization.

3.2. Uses & gratification theory

Uses and gratifications theory discusses how individuals use media to fulfill their wants (Katz et al., 1973). This theory views the users as active participants regulating their own media consumption. Within the context of this paper, uses and gratification theory links to the use, overuse, and dependence problem that social media poses and helps to understand the perspectives of users. Scholars identify different reasons as to user motivation in response to their media consumption including social interaction, information gathering, idle time use, personal entertainment, relaxation, communication, convenience, expressing opinion, information sharing, and gaining knowledge about others (Ko et al., 2005; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Withstanding these reasons, this research also attempts to gauge what other factors drive users to use social media platforms. To nuance this inquiry, uses and gratification theory assists in comprehending how and if social media use offers gratification. Additionally, it attempts to decipher the other end of the spectrum which reflects the dissatisfaction users experience as an outcome of using of social media.

4. Methods

This study relies on a qualitative inquiry taking an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (Smith & Osborn, 2004). IPA describes the core of an existing phenomenon while eliciting responses from several individuals who share similar experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, IPA helps examine the users' perceptions within the social media context where wellbeing is operationalized as self-evaluative. This approach focuses on how participants comprehend their social media experiences while capturing the vital elements of these experiences. IPA's core strength lies in exploring the lived experiences of participants by systematically collecting accounts of their first-hand experiences within a given context. Furthermore, it unveils interpretation of their lived reality and how they make sense of their experiences while the analysis unfolds through the researcher's reflexivity (Shaw, 2010).

The research utilized purposive sampling (Tongco, 2007) with inclusion of participants from diverse countries, different study programs, and study levels, to increase the chance of gaining insights through a diversity of user experiences with social media. The justification is that the study examines a shared phenomenon (Robinson, 2014), which entails something that others are also experiencing, in this case, social media use and engagement. The research was carried out from April to June 2022, through 15 in-depth semi-structured 1-h interviews of university students in Stavanger and Oslo, Norway, to reflect a heterogeneous sample from the capital and periphery. Specifically, the interviewees included four undergraduate students, four master’s students, five PhD students and two post-docs. Table 1 presents a participant profile.

Prior to beginning the interviews, the research got ethical approval from the Norsk senter for forskingsdata (NSD) and consent from the participants. Participant recruitment took place at the university libraries, student organizations, university gym and student housing. The data collection utilized theoretical saturation where the data is gathered until it ceases to offer any novel information (Mason, 2010). In-depth interviews were conducted, as they offer a comprehensive understanding of participants’ perspectives while presenting a description of their social environment (Silverman, 2016). The interviews were recorded, and participants’ narrative was transcribed into a corpus of textual data. The process included making initial notes, reading and re-reading the transcripts, analyzing each interview thoroughly, and then finding patterns across participants. The analysis was further developed by generating sub-topics and organizing them categorically, such as the communication patterns in Norway, browsing behaviors on social media platforms, motivating factors for social media use, the aftermath of social media use, as well as stages of social media engagement. Further, the analysis involved interpreting the participants’ experiences as well as solutions proposed by them. While IPA was chosen due to its idiographic focus as it aims to offer insights into how a given person in a specific context makes sense of a given scenario, in terms of limitation, using IPA placed a cap on the sample size, as overrun by attention and detail to each case. Despite this limitation, due to a heterogeneous participant sample, the findings of this research reflect a shared phenomenon of how students in Norway perceive their wellbeing amid social media usage.

5. Findings

Now that we can hide behind a screen
 Chat online, play games, and stream
 We can avoid being bored
 And put aside emotions stored
 Social media seems like a friend
 And that’s the current trend
 But is this artificial interaction worth the while?
 Does it bring on a genuine smile?
 It has its benefits we might agree
 But it takes up time to a great degree
 The aftermath of being in the virtual world brings a regret
 For there is a real world which we tend to forget
 All the scrolling and notifications offer a temporary high
 At the end then, why are we left with a remorseful sigh?
 Now that we become aware of our social media use
 We no longer wish to remain a platform’s muse

Table 1 Participant profile.

Participants	Gender	Study Level	Study Program	Nationality
P1	Male	Computer Science	Masters	Nepalese
P2	Male	Data Science	Masters	Kenyan
P3	Male	Theology	Bachelors	Norwegian
P4	Male	Physics	Masters	British
P5	Male	Risk Management	Post-Doc	Columbian
P6	Female	Data Science	PhD	Indian
P7	Male	Geology	Post-Doc	American
P8	Male	Computer Science	Bachelors	Norwegian
P9	Male	Engineering	PhD	Pakistani
P10	Female	Theology	Masters	Norwegian
P11	Male	Pedgogy	Bachelors	Norwegian
P12	Male	Political Science	PhD	British
P13	Male	Business	Bachelors	Norwegian
P14	Female	Biology	PhD	Brazilian
P15	Male	Petroleum Engineering	PhD	Iranian

5.1. Interpersonal communication patterns in Norway

International students in this study find the communication patterns in Norway partly responsible for their reliance on social media platforms. Informant P9 conveys, “as an international student in Norway, I do not know many people. Also, not being in a culture wherein greeting strangers or making casual small talk is the norm, it triggers feelings of isolation, which leaves me with no other option except for going on social media platforms. One must become superhuman to impress others. It’s exaggerated self-presentation; it’s not about happiness.”

Correspondingly, informant P1 states, “since I have come to Norway, I use more social media because of less human interaction here. Ideally, I would like to meet people and talk to them personally every day, but that is not the culture in Norway. There is no such thing as approaching a stranger or striking a conversation at the gym or library unless one knows them from before or they are part of an activity group.”

Likewise, several international student informants in this study describe feeling isolated even when around thousands of students on university campuses due to the lack of interaction and minimalistic purpose-oriented conversational style in Norway. The lack of social connections is stated as one of the key reasons for their reliance on social media platforms. Moreover, the lack of free on-campus activities is cited as another reason for social media dependence.

The international students in this study concur feeling isolated in Norway because of the lack of social connections and minimum interaction with fellow students. While literature describes social wellbeing as one of the primary components of overall wellbeing, international students describe feeling socially dissatisfied in the Norwegian context. As a coping mechanism, they drift towards social media platforms to search for connections.

5.2. Social media use

None of the informants in this study report using an online tracking app to track their social media or online behavior. However, they approximate their average usage on social media platforms ranging from 4 h to 11 h a day. All informants report that they would ideally like to spend lesser time on social media platforms. Results indicate that most informants label their behavior as “addictive” and remain accessible online all the time.

The reasons informants state for using and relying on social media include, boredom, a desire for voyeurism, the lack of real-time human interaction, the pandemic, lack of non-digital activities, limited social connections, a sense of exclusion, as well as free internet access on university campuses in Norway. Some informants express a desire to switch off but cannot do so due to most communication being on social media platforms. According to informant P4, “Social media use is a mixed bag. Although it’s easy to access people through social media

platforms, it makes meeting people in real life difficult. Everyone seems comfortable hiding behind a screen and sharing information on social media.”

Echoing a similar perspective, informant P11 states, “somehow it’s difficult to disconnect because student organizations at university put up information on social media sites, so if I want to stay attuned to the happenings on campus and attend events offered by the university, I must be active on social media.” Informant P7 articulates that the staff at cafes and restaurants encourage placing orders online by downloading their app. While attending university events, student organizations give freebies for liking them on social media platforms, thus incentivizing social media use.

Informants believe that they are being indirectly forced to use social media platforms for information gathering as well as communicating, and if they choose not to use it, they feel excluded. Informant P14 discloses, “if I do not use social media platforms to connect with others, people give me a strange gaze as if I am doing something unusual or that I am not in sync with the rest of the world. It’s almost like peer pressure.” Whereas other informants express a desire to drown in a sea of unlimited information through social media newsfeeds, even though they realize that they do not need all the information. Informants reveal that they consume news in general, as well as consume information that is relevant to them, such as notifications, etc.

These findings reflect that social media use could partly be the users’ prerogative, and partly be externally triggered by platform creators and university organizations that coerce students to use social media for the purpose of gathering information. Not doing so, may induce a fear of missing out.

5.3. The aftermath of using social media

Many informants report experiencing feelings of regret after using social media platforms. Although they acknowledge often feeling anxious and dissatisfied after using social media platforms, informants’ reason that the fear of missing out is one of the main factors for constantly looking at social media notifications. Informant P10 explains, “I waste so much time being on these platforms, and nothing comes out of it, yet I don’t unplug because of the fear that I may miss out on

something.”

Other concerns that informants describe consist of wastage of time searching and scrolling, a constant temptation to check notifications, posts, and messages, even while studying. Informant P13 contends, “social media is distracting, and my attention span has decreased because of this. It’s easy to divert because of a stimulus like a notification or message, even when I’m at a party or concert or on the bus.”

Informants believe that one of the main problems with having a social media presence is that it initiates comparing lives. For instance, informant P6 states, “while social media increases my visibility amongst online friends, I don’t feel happy after using it because everyone is showing their best self and not their real life. Comparing with others is dangerous to mental health and triggers anxiety.” Other informants echo similar perspectives on how social media presence makes them feel bitter about their own lives in comparison to others, thus jeopardizing their psychological wellbeing.

Amid creating a perfect social media persona, and an online popularity contest, informants sense drifting away from rationally thinking about their lives. Besides, gauging life through the lens of social media identities, leaves them dissatisfied. Informant P8 observes, “it’s not healthy to escape one’s emotions through artificial mediums that are designed to spike dopamine. I’m trying to go on a dopamine detox by disconnecting from social media which I find stressful and ‘overfladisk’, meaning superficial. This feeling depletes my wellbeing.”

These findings depict the users’ cognizance of how social media use might contribute to stress and threaten their sense of wellbeing amidst social media comparisons. However, they still feel reluctant to go entirely off social media platforms, mostly because they do not have alternative avenues to gain pertinent information disseminated by university organizations.

5.4. Social media engagement stages

In addition to the impetuses described above that lead to social media usage, informants describe going through different stages while engaging in social media platforms. The stages of social media use and engagement can be totted as being threefold: the pre-stage, the involvement stage, and the post-stage. Table 2 depicts the three stages of

Table 2
Stages of social media engagement.

Stages	Browsing Behaviors on social media platforms (can be proactive or reactive)	Reported Motivations by Informants
<i>Pre-stage: Preparedness to indulge in social media activity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urge to post a comment or a picture on social media platforms - Urge to check social media notifications in response to a stimulus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boredom - A desire for spectacle - Need for connection and/or communication - Inquisitiveness - Anticipation for reward or pleasure - The fear of missing out - Peer influence (a desire to fit in)
<i>Involvement stage: Browsing engagement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Viewing notifications, posts, newsfeeds, etc. - Immersion - Scrolling - Navigating - Posting - Communicating - Expressing opinion, arguing, or engaging in online conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gathering information - Feelings of inclusiveness in virtual communities - Seeking external validation through likes, etc. - The desire to express - The desire to be visible - The desire to be acknowledged
<i>Post stage: The outcome</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finding something - a solution (or not) - Feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction - Dopamine boost -Feeling good about oneself - Dopamine drop - Feelings of remorse - Social media induced regret - Online comparison - Self-esteem issues - Feelings of time wastage 	

engagement, along with the user’s browsing behaviors as well as their motivations to be on social media platforms.

The pre-stage includes the urge to visit social media platforms, either in response to a notification or due to a desire for voyeurism. The involvement stage includes engagement, immersion, and involvement in social media activity. Lastly, the post-stage comprises either feeling good or feeling bad, depending on the experience. For instance, informant P15 states, “how I feel after using social media depends on the kind of interaction I have. If I end up arguing with someone on a social media platform, then it dampens my mood, so it varies from time to time.” Also, when users go online to post their own pictures and get several likes they describe it as, ‘feeling good about themselves.’ Contrarily, when they view others posts and begin comparing themselves to others, they end up ‘feeling bad about their own lives.’

5.5. Solutions proposed by informants

To mitigate the dilemmas posed by social media use, overuse, and dependence, several solutions emerge from this study. These resolutions entail improving social media hygiene by becoming cognizant of one’s social media motivation and behavior; forming healthy boundaries by setting a timer to balance social media use; and disconnecting from those social media platforms that thrive on showing off cherry-picked momentary highlights of people and facilitate opportunities for online comparison. One of the ways to abstain from online comparison is becoming vigilant towards false portrayals and deceptive imagery on social media sites.

Likewise, informants pursuing degrees in data and computer science furnish the advice that understanding the business model of the social media platform creators can help curb social media use. Informant P1 affirms “the app creators are trying to keep users hooked, so refrain from reacting to notifications and prompts.” Also, acquiring social media literacy by training oneself to not use it as a reward or a location for seeking external validation can be valuable.

Similarly, university organizations can foster lesser reliance on social media by finding alternative ways to promote and publicize their events. Whereas, for psychological concerns emerging from social media use, such as online comparison, self-esteem issues, anxiety, etc. informants recommend self-discretionary solutions to mitigate the drawbacks and balance social media use. To facilitate a sense of wellbeing, solutions comprise of goal-oriented searching, setting time frames to navigate through apps, disconnecting from harmful social media interactions and seeking therapeutic interventions when necessary.

These results derived through the accounts of informants of this study contribute to existing literature by drawing attention to the user’s perspective which maintains that rather than enforcing social media platform dependence, it ought to serve as an option. The key solutions proposed by informants to balance social media use and retrieve a sense of wellbeing are shown in Table 3 below.

6. Discussion

Reflecting on the uses and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973), the findings of this study reveal that although users may seek gratification from social media platforms, they may instead end up feeling a sense of remorse after viewing newsfeeds and engaging in social media

interactions, mostly due to online comparison. This finding suggests that the outcome of using social media may not be in sync with the initial desire of deriving satisfaction from social media engagement. Elaborating further, some informants mention that inactivity on social media attracts a critical gaze from their peers, reflecting a subtle form of peer influence. A desire to fit in and belong to a virtual community can also attribute to social media use. In addition, the lure of the dopamine boost (Macit et al., 2018) finds some semblance with the theoretical approach of uses and gratification which supports that media users may partake in social media to obtain fulfilment. However, this remains debatable, as users may capitulate to social media with the intent to fit in. The idea of fitting in to the social media bubble may or may not prove to be gratifying. Furthermore, it can be reasoned that although user intention to indulge in social media activity could partly be driven by a desire for gratification, the outcome need not be consistently gratifying, as seen in the findings. This portrays a gap between user intention and the outcomes of social media use.

Secondly, the findings show that some users have a desire or motivation to be visible on social media and feel a sense of belonging and presence in an online community. This is consistent with the media-tization theory (Hjarvard, 2013), in particular, it resonates with the concept of amalgamation, which suggests that different actors utilize the power of media to gain publicity while media platforms expand viewership through them (Schulz, 2004). Thus, some social media users may seek attention via participatory media practices, wherein within the traditional media’s gatekeeping model, media presentation remained off limits for the masses. Adding to this, the findings reflect that online image creation, self-presentation, a desire for visibility and the fear of missing out are factors that weaken social media resistance. Moreover, the immersion of media into the mundane life (Deuze, 2011), may contribute to the pre-occupation with social media.

Although social media platforms facilitate easier access to online communication and offer a sense of informational support (Cheung et al., 2011; Kross et al., 2021), the findings of this study show that communicating and disseminating information entirely through social media platforms can have adverse bearings on users perceived sense of wellbeing. Users may feel excluded and often feel forced to use social media due to the lack of alternatives. During their expositions, informants reaffirm the notion of the fear of missing out put forward by scholars (Moore & Craciun, 2021) as one of the reasons for using social media.

Also, anxiety and the lack of contentment may contribute to excessive digital usage (Rubin, 2009). International student informants of this study echo a similar response to their social media connectedness, due to the perceived deficiency of social networks, less human interaction, and the lack of communal satisfaction in Norway. Since scholars posit social wellbeing as one of the key areas of wellbeing amongst others (Smith & Puczkó, 2008) and social exclusion tends to reduce a sense of wellbeing (Sjåstad et al., 2021), users may be driven towards social media platforms to achieve a sense of social wellbeing which they may otherwise find lacking in their day-to-day life in Norway. This could be indicative of the cultural communication style being a push factor for using social media platforms. Moreover, the inquiry in this study reveals that in the framework of Norwegian universities, the factors promoting social media use include a desire for forming connections, networking, and disseminating information. In this regard, social media can serve as a

Table 3
Solutions to balance social media use.

Digital Solutions	Non-Digital Solutions
Improving social media hygiene through forming healthy boundaries by setting a timer	Connecting with people non-digitally
Disengaging from online comparison	Not using social media as a reward or external validation
Improving social media literacy by becoming vigilant towards false portrayals on social media sites	Finding alternative ways to gather information
Being purpose-oriented while using social media platforms rather than viewing it as an activity	Engaging in non-digital activities, such as exercising, nature walks, or yoga
Raising social media immunity	Seeking therapeutic interventions when necessary

tool to seek new information and to realize meaningful activities, as resonated in research on the positive aspects of social media (Ytre-Arne, 2016). Contrarily, factors contributing to social media overuse and dependence include, boredom, lack of real-time social connections, the fear of missing out, peer influence, lack of alternative avenues to seek information, constant distraction due to notifications, and cultural communication norms. The cultural communication element emerging in this study shows that the cultural environment is a key part of comprehending how social media behaviors play out in the lives of users. Although perceptions of wellbeing amid the social media context may vary from country to country and from time to time, the analysis contributes to the understanding of how social media use shapes experiences and perceptions of wellbeing amongst university students in Norway.

While scholars suggest solutions such as digital detox (More & First, 2018; Ytre-Arne, 2016), complete deactivation (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and temporary disconnection (Jorge, 2019), this research finds that communication in Norway largely takes place on social media platforms. For instance, several student organizations use social media sites to publicize events, thus deterring students to withdraw from these platforms. Forced social media use does not ease disconnection, contrarily it encourages users to remain on these platforms. To overcome such barriers to disconnection or voluntary withdrawal, organizations could offer alternative options, such as posters and billboards for disseminating information to students.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper synthesizes the phenomenon of wellbeing and social media use. The key takeaways from this study are that on the positive side social media use facilitates connections with others allowing a sense of belonging which may enhance wellbeing. On the negative side, excessive social media use may lead to the fear of missing out, online comparison, obsessive self-presentation, and online harassment, among others, which may diminish a sense of wellbeing.

Potential user-centric solutions to address these adverse issues and help sustain wellbeing could include raising awareness of ones' social media behavior and developing social media immunity. Thus, it may be helpful to refrain from drawing comparisons with others by recognizing that mediatic presentations on social media platforms are often set up in a mixed backdrop of momentary highlights, exhibitionism, and illusive self-promotion to create picture-perfect portrayals.

Although this research centers on user-centric resolutions to overcome the problems of social media use that may jeopardize perceived wellbeing, the onus of social media wellbeing may not entirely rest with the end-users. It also requires intervention from digital policy makers, platform creators and student organizations at universities who play a key role in contributing to social media use.

Overall, the contribution of this paper builds an understanding of the construct of wellbeing integrated into specific contexts such as digital and social media use, thus widening the scope of research. Although this may hold, the field of wellbeing remains a fluid phenomenon as it is largely subjective. Also, the study of wellbeing in the social media context reflects dichotomous perspectives with positive and negative aspects. Furthermore, it is continually evolving because there are different factors and contexts that may play a role in how social media users experience wellbeing.

8. Limitations and future research

By way of limitations, although this study includes international student participants, it is positioned in the context of Norwegian universities. The findings are context-specific reflecting the communication style in Norway and at Norwegian universities. Also, free, and unlimited access to wireless networking on university campuses in Norway could be partly responsible for supporting social media dependence. In

different contexts, where unlimited free access to wireless networking is not available, findings may differ. Hence, studies on the perceptions of wellbeing amidst social media use done in other cultural contexts could help nuance the research in this field.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Bindiya Dutt: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Software, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Dr. Helle Sjøvaag and Dr. Raul Ferrer-Conill.

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