Social Media and European Youth: A Combined Qualitative Analysis of Finland and Spain

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A Combined Qualitative Analysis of Finland and Spain

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Abstract

There has been an extreme advancement in technology over the years and social media has become widely used. The impact of internet and social media plays an important role in young people's lives.Therefore, the focus of this research is to define and better understand the terms and uses of internet and social media use, observe its effects and how to manage its use. It examines the relation of European youth and social media, while researching different types of social media networks, as well as their impact on young people's behavior. A combined methodology of content analysis and a comparative analysis of Spain and Finland follows, in order to observe social media's impact in two European countries. Two research questions come forth in order to observe whether social media is safe for youths to use, and whether schools need to educate students and parents about social media's advantages and disadvantages, its risks and how it may affect them. This article concludes with some observations.

Keywords: Social media and youth; social media networks; social media effects; social media types; European youth; teenagers

Introduction

Technology has evolved extremely over the years. People globally are using the internet more and more each day, either for work, education or entertainment purposes. The internet is a cutting-edge tool used for publishing, learning, receiving information and communicating among people, despite of distance or time (Farfieva, 2020). It has become an important tool of people's everyday lives to all ages. There has been a remarkable increase on internet use between 2005 and 2023. Research in the European Union shows that in 2005, 70% of European youth between the ages of 6-17 years old used the internet, whereas in 2010 the percentage increased to 93% and in 2023, the percentage reached 97% among the ages of 16-29 (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2011; European Statistics, 2023). One area, in particular, where people are spending an extraordinary amount of time on the internet is social media.

Social media is primarily a means of communication to all, regardless of age, region, distance, social or economic status and it has become widely used. It is identified as different networks that by using

platforms or websites, people can communicate with others individually or in a group, either by posting their opinion, commenting on other posts or sending personal messages to someone (Klingemann and Sierosławski, 2018). Furthermore, social media networks help benefit in areas such as recruiting connections, socializing and others (Ellison et al., 2007). For instance, viewing UK newspaper websites, it has been observed that "The Sun" attracts much more viewers through social media than other newspaper competitors (Couldry, 2009). Especially during the Covid-19 lockdown that lasted for a considerable amount of time, there has been an extraordinary increase of social media use worldwide, since everyone had to stay indoors, therefore, social media use was the only way to communicate with others (Alonzo et al., 2020). For instance, in Europe, social media has influenced the lives of everyone, especially people in younger ages. More so, the younger generations have grown being surrounded by such technology, which is evolving more and more each day. Teenagers, in particular, due to the fact that they are in this stage of life that reaching adulthood and maturity are in a rather accelerated mode, may cause some concerns to people who moderate access to such communities that are for general public use (Ahn, 2011).

The impact of internet and social media on youth participation plays an important role in young people's lives. As Figure 1 shows, it seems that in European countries, the younger population is using an extreme amount of time participating in different social media networking sites than the rest of the European population (European Statistics, 2023).

This article examines the relation of young people in European countries and social media and aims to apprehend the purpose of digital social media, its effects and how to manage its use. The purpose of this research is to introduce internet technology and social media, followed by a literature review identifying different types of social media networks that have developed over the years and the effects on people's behavior, focusing on European youth. Using a combined methodology of case study analysis and a comparative analysis of two European countries – Finland and Spain – will follow, in order to observe social media's differences and similarities of social media's impact in these two countries. Afterwards, we will go over the findings, provide answers to research questions, and in the final section, we will overview the study's conclusions. At this point, we would like to mention that any addictive behaviors may differ among countries, depending on their traditions and beliefs.

Figure 1: People who participated on social networking sites, EUROSTAT, 2023

People who participated in social networks, 2023
(%)

■ **Young people aged 16-29 years** ■ **Total population**
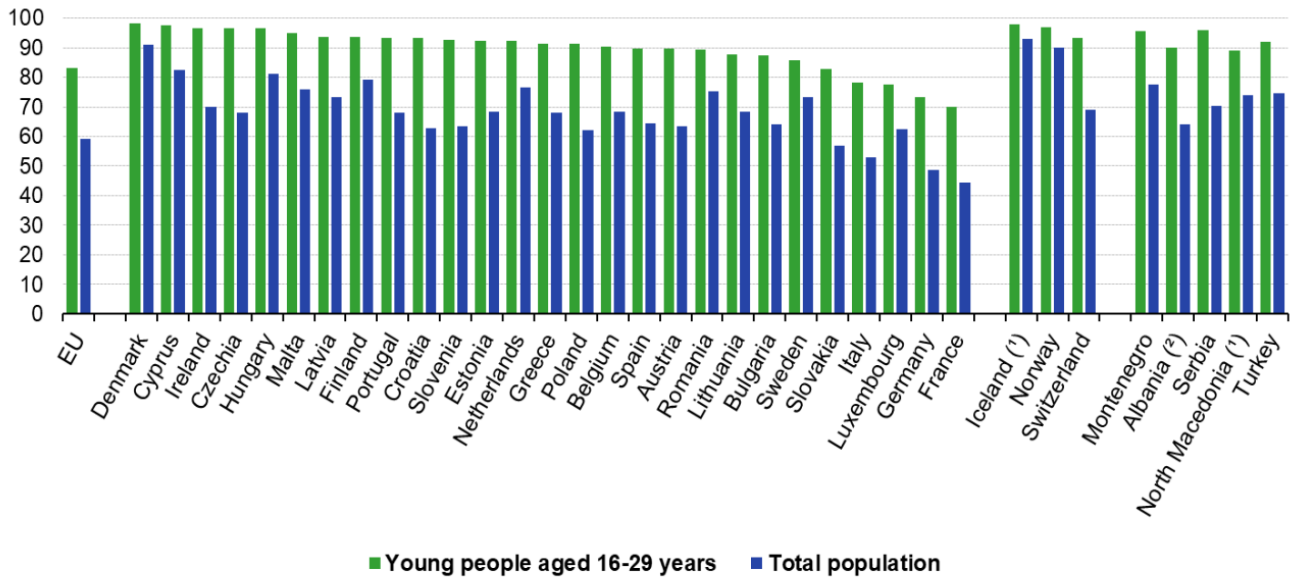
Note: for example, created a user profile, posted messages or other contributions. Social networks include, for example, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tiktok, X (former Twitter).
(¹) Data from 2021
(²) Data from 2022
Source: Eurostat (online data code: isoc_ci_ac_i)

eurostat ▪

Literature Review

The term "social media" refers to refers to internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) with a broad category of applications allowing users to interact, connect and share information (Chan-Olmsted et al., 2013; Ilakkuvan et al., 2019). Social media consists of many types that helps people communicate with others worldwide, whether it is for leisure, educational or socializing purposes. It seems that among all age groups, social media has affected the younger age group more than others, since they are the most articulate users of social media and social network communication (Allen et al., 2014). They tend to use it to talk to their friends, create videos, or even play games online. Especially during the Covid-19 period, social media use has increased tremendously. During that period, people frequently experienced feelings of social isolation and solitude, and many turned to resources like social media and "digital connections" in order to help them feel less isolated (Vismara et al., 2022; Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius, 2020). Nowadays, most adolescents

prefer texting to their friends rather than picking up the phone to have a conversation with them, thus, changing the means of communication, as digital technology is becoming an essential part of their life, both in terms of education and culture (Allen et al., 2014).

In the following sections, we will examine many ways social media has affected European youth's behavior. A considerable number of adolescents have their own mobile phones. They tend to use their mobile phones on a daily basis, thus having access to the internet, which encourages them to have access to just about anything, including social media networks, gaming, gambling and even marketing. Spending so much time doing all these things may be linked to internet addiction, which in return may affect their sleeping patterns, mental health or even their well-being.

2.1 Types of Social Media

Social networks are basically different types of online platforms where people can create accounts, post pictures or videos, express their opinion and build their network with other people, whether they have similar interests or not (Chan-Olmsted et al., 2013). In addition to adults and adolescents who use social media for communication, information and entertainment, young children are also using social media more and more (Bruggeman et al., 2019). According to EUROSTAT 2023, at least 90% of youths in 18 European countries reported using social networking sites, and between 83% and 89% of reported engaging in networking activities such as Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, Tiktok and X (former Twitter) in five additional countries (European Statistics, 2023).

Some very common social networks are Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Instant messaging are applications that someone can have a conversation either with an individual, or a created group of friends. The most common instant messengers are Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber and Skype. Microblogs are more like logs, making small notes where one can also post photographs and videos. Twitter is the most common microblog, where one can create notes not more than 140 characters (Chan-Olmsted et al., 2013; Ilakkuvan et al., 2019; Chidiac et al., 2022). Regarding online games, there are all sort of games that someone can play online, some are even played in real-time and in many of them, they can even chat while they are playing. There are many different types of online games, such as sport games, strategy games, an improved version of traditional games and gambling games. Online dating is another social network where people are looking for partners with common interests and likes in order to meet or date. The most common online dating network is Tinder (Livingstone et al., 2011). According to EU Kids Online, recent studies in Spain indicate that young individuals use social networks on a daily basis by changing

their birth date, in order to create profiles to follow influencers on networks like Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube or Twitch (EU Kids Online, 2020).

Regarding playing games and gambling, a strong correlation was found with stimulation of the mind, which can accelerate harmfulness and social disorders (Kang et al., 2013). Despite the fact that there are several laws worldwide restricting gambling activities under the ages 18 or 21, the gambling industry has made several technological improvements that has made gambling games accessible to underage youth, thus making it possible for young population to be exposed to unfit substances (Savolainen et al., 2020).

An auditory survey method study made by ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) in Poland in 2015, collected data from 14,226 sixteen-year-old participants, males and females, out of five different European Countries (Poland, Greece, the Netherlands, Romania and Sweden). The purpose of the study was to determine how much time they spent peering with others using social media and how much time they spent playing games online. The results varied from country to country, showing that Polish teenage participants used social networks 26.6% for more than three hours a day, whereas Dutch teenagers reported 51.7%, Swedish teenagers 27.9%, Romanian teenagers 19.7% and Greek teenagers 11.6%. Furthermore, the results also showed that females were spending more time on social media, whereas males were spending more time playing online games (Livingstone et al., 2011). It seems that the main reason young people use social media is that they all want to be a member of a group; they don't want to be left out and they have what is called the Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) (Livingstone et al., 2011). Taking into consideration that the period of youth is an important time to learn and develop skills, spending too much time on social media, including gaming and gambling, can affect their performance at school. For instance, they can have many absences or low grades, which in the long run, may alter their future plans. Even though social media is associated to increasing socialization and sense of connectiveness, there may be some concerns for its redundant use.

Effects of Social Media

Internet Addiction and Mental Health

Even though internet addiction can have a negative influence, increased online communication may also have a positive influence on people who are prone to hiding their true selves because it can help build relationships and make people feel connected to others (Magsamen-Conrad et al., 2014). Internet addiction is being referred to as "electronic cocaine" or "digital heroin" and it has been associated to online role gaming with multiple players and screen addiction by young individuals (Núñez-Gómez et al., 2021). A study of 336 Serbian high school students observed a possible relation between internet

addiction and depression in youth showing that people addicted to the internet are more likely to have symptoms of some sort of depression (Banjanin et al., 2015), ADHD[1] symptoms or hostility (Shapiro and Margolin, 2014). Another possible relation between internet addiction and social media frequency use was personality and psychological discomfort. Following Muller et al., (2016) in their study of 9,173 teenagers between the ages 12-19, showed that 4.1% males and 3.6% females who used social networking sites heavily were more likely to be diagnosed with internet addiction and showed higher levels of psychosocial distress.

As information technology advanced over the years, numerous new issues have surfaced regarding the potential link between internet use and specific mental health issues. Worldwide, 10-20% of children and teenagers experience some sort of mental health issue, while generalized anxiety disorder is the most common disorder in children, and depression in teenagers (Keles et al., 2020). There is also a relation between online activities and increased symptoms of depression and decreased family communication. On the other hand, even though a positive correlation was found between depressive symptoms, internet use and internet addiction, there was not much correlation found between social networking usage and depressive symptoms or related behaviors, like the number of Facebook friends or the quantity of self-created photos. The relation between the level of internet addiction and depression was not affected by the amount of time spent on social network sites or its activities, therefore no relation was shown between addiction and social networking (Núñez-Gómez et al., 2021). Furthermore, a relation between social media, self-esteem and mental health in 800 Dutch adolescents showed that using social media more often, increased interaction with friends, while positive exchange of comments had been associated to higher self-esteem leading to a more satisfactory life (Tzavela et al., 2015). It was further noticed that the relation between social network use and internalizing issues was consistently more pronounced in younger teenagers and was linked to decreased activity and academic performance (Tsitsika et al., 2014).

Mobile Phone use

Mobile phone use, especially among young people, is rapidly expanding as mobile phone penetration in societies rises causing a rapid increase in the use of online social networking services. In 2021, 99% of children used the internet, and the majority used smartphones (72%) or tablets (69%). Furthermore, according to national statistics, 9 out of 10 kids own a smartphone by the time they turn eleven years old (Bibizadeh et al., 2023). The use of social network mobile applications is a significant predictor of mobile addiction and it is influenced by both social network size and user's activity. In addition, there are some

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[1] Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

implications on the impact of mobile phones on individual and public health, regarding the academic community as well as the governmental and non-profit organizations (Salehan and Negahban, 2013). In Switzerland, out of 1,519 students, 256 of them (16,9%) had a smartphne addiction, which was linked to longer daily average smartphone usage time and reported that social networking was the most personally relevant smartphone feature. Younger teenagers between 15-16 years of age had a higher popularity of smartphone addiction than young adults 19 years and older. On the other hand, there was no relation between addiction to smartphones and drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes (Haug et al., 2015).

Online Gaming and Gambling use

Regarding problem gaming, there is a relation between problem gaming with increased risk of internet addiction, creating an issue for people who are especially at risk for developing behavioral addictions. The last two decades several studies examine young people addiction to gaming. For instance, a study, out of 866 young participants, 1.5% were found addicted to internet use (Kormas et al., 2011), whereas out of 7,292 young participants associated with gambling, 1.6% were addicted (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2004). Furthermore, out of 81 teenagers, 11.3% were addicted to internet and online gaming (Muller et al., 2012; Kuss et al., 2013). Although, despite of what many people think, not all adolescents that are highly engaged to internet, adopt unhealthy internet usage habits. In addition, teenagers are more prone in taking part in more artistic and interactive activities (Lorenzo et al., 2007). For instance, social networking is a popular online activity with 40% of teenagers aged 14 to 17 reporting daily usage of two or more hours on their preferred social networking site and 92% reporting membership in at least one of them (Tsitsika et al., 2014). In addition, a study made examining the usage patterns, experiences and effects to 124 teenagers aged 14 to 17 in seven European countries (Greece, Spain, Poland, Germany, Romania, Netherlands and Iceland) reported some indication of internet addiction. Older adolescents use the internet more frequently as a multipurpose context (Livingstone et al., 2011; Tzavela et al., 2015). The most prevalent behavioral pattern found in the study was the constant online activity with social media use with the majority of participants using the internet to fulfill personal connection, renew information and entertainment activity needs (Tsitsika et al., 2014).

Sleeping Patterns

Even though internet use has been linked with poor sleeping patterns, there are limited studies linking social media use with poor sleeping patterns (Woods and Scott, 2016). Espinoza and Juvonen, (2011) using a sample of 268 young people reported that 37% proclaimed not sleeping enough because of using social

media networks, while Shapiro and Margolin, (2014) found that of 17- to 18-year-olds with internet addiction reported being more tired during the day. The fact of the matter is that different social networking sites have "alerts" that make a sound signal whenever someone uploads a new post or reacts to a post, causing young users to interrupt their sleep due to the sound, in order to see the alert and immediately respond. This can be stressful for them out of Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) of what has been posted, therefore, making it impossible to get enough rest (Espinoza and Juvonen, 2011). Couldry (2009) using a clinical systematic review analyse how excessive use of social media can reciprocate with sleep quality and mental health, such as anxiety, depression and psychological distress. The study concludes that considering tha lack of sleep and not being able to make up for the loss of sleep can interfere with someone's health, youths use social media more before they go to bed, which may affect their quality of sleep, because depending on what they are reading or discussing may increase stimulation, making it difficult to sleep. Also, frequent use of social media is an indication that is related to FOMO[2] that, especially during Covid-19 lockdown, youths increased its use because of the need to be a part of a group and help with changes in their mental well-being (Hayran and Anik, 2021; Ayhan and Oz, 2022; Zhang, 2024). It has been associated that the older people get, the stronger the relation between sleeping quality and patterns to social media use, thus making them more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, including delayed sleeping time, sleeping routine and disturbed sleep (Perez et al., 2021).

Well-Being

It has been reported that some of the effects of social media include confidence, well-being, Facebook depression and cyberbullying. In a Dutch study with 881 young participants, youth's confidence and well-being were influenced depending on the feedback they were receiving from a social network called CU2. Facebook has been linked to depression and young people who spend an enormous amount of time on the site. In addition, cyberbullying – a cyber form of bullying – has been associated with depression, isolation, nervousness and in some cases even self-destruction (Richards et al., 2015). Even though information found online may promote harm, support eating disorders, self-harm, suicide and a positive portrayal of actual deaths (snuff or death sites), studies that examine the frequency of young online users accessing harm-promoting online content are few and far between. According to the EU Kids Online study, 10% of adolescents aged 11 to 16 visited websites related to eating disorders, 7% visited websites related to self-harm, and 5% visited websites related to suicide (Livingstone et al., 2011; Keipi et al., 2017).

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[2] Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)

Furthermore, a negative relation was found between participation in physical activities and social media use (Benson et al., 2019).

Marketing

Between 2000 to 2015, social media marketing transformed conventional methods of marketing. It has expanded the methods in which consumers can purchase, participate, learn and receive services (Ali et al., 2022). Social media marketing also seems to have lower costs than traditional media marketing, and it is able to reach a much broader audience (Jayaram et al., 2015) As social networking sites are becoming more and more popular, concerns have been raised regarding privacy and security, particularly among teenagers who engage in risky behavior on social networking (Vanderhoven et al., 2014). Recent study showed how adolescents are exposed to marketing, while promotion of unhealthy goods on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube include alcohol, tobacco, food and beverages high in calories and low in nutrients (Dunlop et al., 2016). Furthermore, (Vanderhoven et al., 2014) found that there was a success in achieving their objective of increasing student awareness of the risks covered. However, no influence was found on attitudes towards the dangers of social media and only a small influence was established on adolescent behavior regarding the dangers. Opinion seeking and leadership play an important role in illuminating how general personality traits affect social networking and brand communication online (Acar and Polonsky,2007).

Methodology

Combined Methodology

The current study is using a combined methodology approach of case study analysis and comparative analysis. Case studies can involve either single or multiple cases and multiple levels of analysis (qualitative (e.g. words), quantitative (numbers), or both (Priya, 2021; Lindgreen et al., 2021). Following Starman (2013) point of view, case study is a ticket that allows us to enter a research field in which we discover the unknown within well-known borders while continually monitoring our own performance; scalability; and our own, as well as general, existing knowledge. Comparative analysis is an approach used in research studies that takes sustainability and efficiency into account (Metaxas and Psarropoulou, 2021). It focuses on coorelations between and within studies that are carried out over time. Comparative analysis could be selected when conducting a study approach is not convenient or when it is necessary to comprehend and indicate ways that context features impact policies or study achievements. This information is needed in order to support the achievement of the desired results through customized interventions (Goodrick, 2014). Comparative case studies involve the analysis and synthesis of similarities, differences, and

patterns in two or more cases that share a common focus or objective (Gelderblom and Trivellato, 2019; Haupt and Kocka 2004).

For the purposes of this research, a comparative analysis of all European countries may not be possible at this time, therefore, we randomly selected two European countries: Finland (Northern Europe) and Spain (Southern Europe), followed by some research questions that need to be explored. Through these two countries we will observe some differences and similarities among two different areas of Europe while evaluating how location, education (Martínez García et al., 2021), culture and social background may affect the use of social media in youth (Collier, 1993). Finland has a long history of offering public education with a developed economy, and an education system that has been served as a global standard. Spain is a more economically underdeveloped country, and while it has witnessed strong economic progress in recent years, the 2008 financial crisis had a particularly negative impact. In both countries, there are a couple of common components. They both have strong values towards education; they view education as an investment through human capital theories. They also have commonalities in terms of equality, such as encouraging public education, but with different methods, with greater government participation in the educational system, regulating private educational institutions with government support (Martínez García et al., 2021).

Research Questions

This analysis aims to understand social media's use in European youth and to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. *Is social media safe for youths to use?*

RQ2. *Should schools educate students and parents about social media's advantages and disadvantages, its risks and how it can affect them?*

Case studies

Finland

Regarding Northern Europe, Finland – a parliamentary republic country with the prime minister being the head of government and the president being the head of state – joined the EU in 1995. The Worldometer's elaboration of the latest United Nations data at year-end 2023 states that Finland's total magnitude is 303,890 Km^2 and its population is about 5,547,323 (Worldometer's, 2024). Its climate includes long cold winters and mild summers. According to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland's report on Youth, Peace and Security Finland's National Action Plan 2021-2024, Finland's foreign policy is

to continue to enhance its aims of conflict, prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. Finland's primary focus is on Youth, Peace and Security (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2021). Based on their 'social-democratic' policy, the country possesses substantial rates of individual independence and 'self-expressive' principles, which encourage youths to make decisions on their own (Gracia et al., 2022). It's seems very important to present breifly some studies regarding social media effects in Finland will follow.

One of the first empirical studies regarding social media usage in general and the attitude towards marketing communication via social media, performed by Schlich (2011). The sampled populations were students in Finland and Germany, from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, and University of Applied Sciences, Koblenz. All students at both institutions were provided with an online questionnaire. Overall, 736 students responded, 375 in Koblenz and 361 in Helsinki. Among others, a crucial conclusion of this study refers to that every second student in Germany currently is on Facebook a few times a day, in Finland even more than 80%. Half of the students have more than 200 friends on Facebook. Regardless of field of study, Facebook is the most frequently used social network among students in Finland and Germany. In contrast, Twitter is not popular at all in both countries. In sum, the main motivation to use social media is keeping contact to friends and family members and entertainment.

Regarding the impacts of social media, several studies have been applied the last two decades. For instance, Sinkkonen et al., (2014), used the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) to 475 Finnish adolescents between the ages of 15-19 in order to be able to better understand the relation between internet use and its addiction. The results of the IAT showed that 1.3% of them had some serious addiction problems, while 22.9% had moderate addiction and 75.8% were with average internet use. Castrén et al., (2022) present a study made by ESPAD[3] and collected data from 4,595 15- to 16-year-old Finnish participants, regarding excessive use of social media and gaming/gambling. Findings showed that Finnish females spent an excessive amount of time using social media (46%), whereas Finnish males spent an excessive amount of time playing games online (23%) and even gambling (6%). Furthermore, it has been shown that the use of such an increased amount of time of social media use can influence people's behavior in their social lives, work, studies, relationships, mental wellness and well-being. Nevertheless, there has been an association between extensive time used on gaming and gambling with problematic behavior, which has been characterized as "Disorders. In addition, Kortesoja et al., (2023) in a sample of 1,084 Finnish adolescents between the ages of 15-20 investigate the relation between late-night digital media use of all media forms

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[3] The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs

and sleep quality. Findings showed associations between late-night digital media use and daytime fatigue, shorter sleep duration, and more insufficient sleep.

In addition, Keipi et al., (2017) present a cross-sectional study, which included 15 to 30 year old of 1,032 American and 555 Finnish youth, investigated the relationship between exposure to harm-promoting online content and users' subjective well-being. In both nations, exposure to various forms of online harm-advocating content was common. These findings from two high-tech information societies, highlight the significance of identifying harmful online communities. The study demonstrated that in both countries, exposure to harmful content was linked to lower subjective well-being. From their point of view, Paakkari et al., (2021) using a sample of 3,408 Finnish adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 investigate the related risk between frequency social media use and addiction causing health issues. The results showed that 33.5% belonged to a moderate risk group were females and adolescents with less health awareness and parental supervision were more likely to have some sort of negative health outcome and 9.4% belonged to problematic social media use. Oksanen and Keipi (2013) investigates cybercrime, younger age groups who are active Internet users. A population-based cross-sectional survey collected from 15 to 74 year olds in Finland (n = 46,139) is used as data. Through descriptive and multinomial logistic regression analysis found that young people are more likely to be victims of cybercrime even when other factors were adjusted for. Besides age, other factors including gender, education, economic status, and violent victimization are associated with cybercrime victimization. On the contrary, Savimaki et al., (2020) examine the phenomeno of On-line hate, investigating why some people are disquieted more by hateful online content than others. The study used data from Finnish participants (n = 1726) between 15 and 30 years old. Among others, the findings, based on ordinary least-squares regression analysis (OLS), show that the intensity of such negative experiences was stronger for women, immigrants, and those who had faced previous online and offline victimization.

Spain

Regarding Southern Europe, Spain – a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy country with the prime minister being the head of government and the monarch being the head of state – joined the EU in 1986. The Worldometer's elaboration of the latest United Nations data at year-end 2023, states that Spain's total magnitude is 498,800 Km^2 and its population is about 47,500,230 (Worldometer's, 2024). Its climate includes a variety of hot summers and cold winters offshores and mild summers and cool winters by the shore, making it the most diversified climate-wise country across Europe. According to 2021-2024 Foreign Action Strategy Spain's report, Spain's national interest promotes a peaceful,

cooperative and effective international order (Foreign Action Strategy, 2021-24). The country's policy is more 'family-oriented' as family plays a relatively significant role in cross-generational caring relationships (Gracia et al., 2022). Its dedication to peace and responsibility for enhancing global stability, makes it a dependable and prestigious partner for other nations. Spain is a global leader in environmental and social issues. Furthermore, the country's initiative includes management of environmental preservation, battle against climate change, energy transition, and immigrant integration (Foreign Action Strategy, 2021-24). It's seems very important to present breifly some studies regarding social media effects in Spain will follow.

In Spain, after Covid-19, the amount of mobile phone use increased 38% and WhatsApp use increased 61% (Núñez-Gómez et al., 2021). Furthermore, in an older study made to 2,054 Spanish young adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 observed how social networking is used in that age group (Sánchez-Navarro and Aranda, 2012). Following this study, in Spain the most common social networks are Tuenti and Fotolog with 68.5% and 18.4% respectively, whereas Facebook with 10.1%. The results showed that social media is primarily used for entertainment, social and learning purposes. 79.5% of them talk to other friends and 66.6% look at what other people are doing, even thru their friends' contacts. Teenagers most commonly connect with pre-existing friends, in order to extend their socialism, when they are not together and they do so by sharing experiences that occur, which are affecting them daily, therefore making it an extensive way of learning. A year later (García-Jiménez et al, 2013), examined the shifts occurring in adolescent online communication practices of 2,077 Spanish adolescents between the ages of 12-17. As a result of social media networks influence into their daily lives, the impact of social network use to general online life was identified. Results showed that teenagers spent the most time on social networks, with 75.3% of them connecting very frequently. Furthermore, 31.7% accessed chatrooms and forums, while 14.2% accessed photo-sharing websites and 9.1% virtual worlds. In addition, it has been observed that 84.1% of 15–17-year-olds accessed social networks more frequently than 68% of 12–14-year-olds. Among them, the three most preferred social networks were indicated with 86.9% of them having at least one profile on Tuenti, 73.4% on Facebook and 39% on Twitter.

Furthermore, Apaolaza et al, (2013) in order to observe the effects of teenage Spanish users' frequent use of the most preferred social networking site like Tuenti on their mental health, a study of 344 Spanish adolescents between the ages of 12-17 was made to examine online Tuenti profiles. The level of socializing on the social networking site was positively correlated with the frequency teenagers used Tuenti. Additionally, teenagers' awareness of well-being was influenced favorably by their social interactions on Tuenti. Findings showed that Tuenti has become a suitable social media platform for growth,

consolidation and development of social relationships among Spanish teenagers. The results of this study are consistent with those of other authors who support that overall social media use may have a positive impact on users, including most teenagers. Although, these results may contradict prior research which suggested that social networks use had a negative impact on mental health and psychological well-being.

While several studies suggested there is a negative association between social media and adolescents' well-being, a survey study was conducted among four countries (Belgium, Spain, Austria and South Korea) (De Lenne et al., 2020). Among them, Spain participated with 564 adolescents between the ages of 13-17, in order to address internalizing numerous values that presented on social media. Findings showed a positive relation of internalizing romantic and social values of Facebook use, while Instagram showed a positive relation of internalizing romantic, social, sensual and professional values. Furthermore, a direct association was found between Facebook and mental health conditions.

In addition, Álvarez-García et al., (2015) using a sample of 3,180 Spanish adolescents between the ages 11-19, investigate the ability of several sociodemographic, mental, academic, family and technological aspects to predict whether they would experience frequent or extensive cybervictimization. According to the results of the multinomial logistic regression study, age, at school victimization, parental supervision, risky behavior of internet use through online social networks or messaging applications and the amount of internet use during the weekend are significantly associated with risks for cybervictimization. On the other hand, even if cyberbullying is quite familiar, current data reports that it doesn't occur as much as offline bullying (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Even though social networking, like Facebook, is becoming more and more popular, not a lot is known regarding the way Facebook is used in different age groups and if its use is related to well-being (Hayes et al., 2015). Furthermore, even if friendship and Facebook use may be linked to insecurity, there has been no relation between insecurity and social compensation. Insecure participants with increased Facebook use didn't report any comfort interacting with others offline due to Facebook (Baker and Oswald, 2010). Even if no correlation has been reported between social compensation and interacting in person and using Facebook, doesn't mean that nervous people may feel more comfortable after its use (McCord et al., 2014).

Comparative Analysis

Even though social media has affected many European countries, this research will focus on different traits or similarities of Finland and Spain. In order to assess extensive use of internet, a study of 1,021 adolescents was made in Bizkaia Spain, with the average age of the participants being 14.95 years old,

using the Revised Generalized and Problematic Internet Use Scale (GPIUS2). The internal structure, which consists of four factors—Preference for online social connection, Mood regulation, Deficient self-regulation and Negative consequences—was supported by empirical research. Findings showed that all four factors were interrelated and there was a significant relation between social media communication and extensive internet use (Guadix et al, 2013). Recent studies in Europe have reported prevalence rates ranging from 4.4% to 13.5% of extensive internet use and 14.3% to 54.9% of problematic internet use. In Spain, problematic internet users are estimated to account for 18.5% to 4.9% of all extensive internet users (Peris et al., 2020). Furthermore, in order to observe the exposure of young people to harmful digital content based on potential risks and safety factors, and whether family and peer support may assist in preventing such exposure, a study was made of 4473 participants aged 12-16 years old from three countries, two of which were Finland and Spain. Findings showed that family support may assist as a safety factor from being exposed to harmful digital content in all three countries, and even though there may be an increased association of peer support to the exposure of harmful digital content in Finland, there was no similar association to the other countries (Kvardova et al., 2021).

Since adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, further research will provide better awareness of mental health risks of internet addiction and social nettworking (Peris et al, 2020). Based on the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey of 154,981 adolescents between the ages of 11, 13 and 15 across 29 European countries, investigated the relation between intense and problematic Social Media Use (SMU) with adolescents' well-being by country. Among the European countries, Spain participated with a sample of 4,070 adolescents and reported 38.37% of intense SMU and 14.17% of problematic SMU, whereas, Finland participated with a sample of 3,067 adolescents and reported 27.08% and 10.16% respectively. Prevalence of SMU by country is listed in Figure 3. Findings contradict with the idea that intense SMU is associated with decreased well-being by demonstrating the connection between intense SMU and adolescents' well-being. Users in countries with intense SMU reported higher levels of fulfillment, rather than risk behaviors. However, results also showed that in all countries, users with problematic SMU were negatively associated with their well-being, which highlights the potential harm of problematic SMU (Boer et al., 2020).

Figure 3. Prevalence of Social Media Use (SMU) by country, (Boer et al., 2020: pp. S97)

Prevalence by country

Country	N	Intense SMU	Problematic SMU
Spain	4,070	38.37%	14.17%
Wales	15,456	37.26%	11.99%
Ireland	3,628	38.72%	11.99%
Italy	4,069	49.87%	10.56%
Finland	3,067	27.08%	10.16%
Greece	3,715	34.06%	9.93%
Scotland	4,916	39.31%	9.45%
Norway	3,053	39.46%	9.14%
Belgium (French)	3,695	38.32%	8.02%
Lithuania	3,685	40.90%	7.78%
England	3,306	33.91%	7.60%
Poland	5,055	43.25%	7.60%
France	8,621	36.82%	7.59%
Luxembourg	3,889	34.83%	7.37%
Canada	12,355	35.33%	6.71%
Belgium (Flanders)	4,117	43.29%	6.65%
Portugal	5,866	40.36%	5.92%
Estonia	4,622	31.42%	5.79%
Hungary	3,715	23.58%	5.39%
Latvia	4,143	25.95%	5.38%
Germany	4,126	26.15%	5.35%
Czech Republic	11,162	21.97%	5.33%
Slovenia	5,126	31.58%	5.31%
Sweden	4,006	43.10%	5.31%
Austria	4,011	33.18%	4.86%
Iceland	6,693	34.14%	4.83%
Switzerland	7,122	17.35%	4.47%
Denmark	3,113	35.04%	4.12%
Netherlands	4,579	27.53%	3.22%
Average	154,981	34.03%	7.38%

Countries were sorted on their problematic SMU prevalence.
SMU = social media use.

Problematic gaming activity and its relation to mental, social and well-being concerns, were observed in a study made to 293 Finnish participants between the ages of 13-24 (Männikkö et al., 2015). Findings showed a relation between problematic gaming behavior and mental and health issues, while some of the symptoms included depression, anxiety, sleep disruption and exhaustion. The study showed a negative association between problematic gaming habits and health issues. Yet, another study was made to 946 Spanish adolescents between the ages 11-18 to investigate the risk factors of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) using three hypotheses: comorbidity, self-regulation and impersonal impairment. 8.45% of the participants, as a whole, reported to have IGD (Fumero et al., 2020). The correlational data showed that IGDs was connected with anxiety and depression. These results contribute to the comorbidity hypothesis and support the idea that IGDs can coexist with other psychological issues. Additionally, the study showed a link between IGDs and family issues, supporting the idea that interpersonal functioning is impaired. However, it was found that IGDs were associated with aggression, impulsiveness and time spent playing.

Furthermore, Sirola et al., (2021) studied to four countries the ages of 15-25 in order to observe how online social group involvement predicts youths' interest in gambling content and their adherence to observed social standards on social media. Two of these countries were Spain with 1,212 participants and Finland with 1,200 participants. Findings showed that Finland's participants had a weaker association in online social groups with reported interest in gambling content than in other countries, indicating that those involved in online social groups are more prone to social impacts. Savolainen et al., (2020) investigate whether social media anticipates problem gambling in youth. It was reported that 90% of Spanish youth between the ages of 16-24 were actively using social media networks and all of Finnish youth of the same age group were actively using social media networks. In addition, 76% of Spanish participants had a high gambling popularity rate, whereas close to 19% of Finnish participants was susceptible to problem gambling. The results showed a much higher association of social media to problem gambling in Spain than in Finland.

In Finland, adolescents between the ages of 15- to 16-year-old spend, on average, 4 hours 22 minutes on social media use daily. Moreover, in order to investigate whether there is an association of social media use and depressive symptoms, a study was made to 2,891 Finnish adolescents between the ages of 13-19. Findings showed that there is an insufficient amount of increase to depressive symptoms regarding to social media use (Puukko et al., 2020). For that matter, another study was made to two target groups, one was 1,702 Finnish adolescents between the ages 12-14 and another was 1,636 Finnish adolescents between the ages 16-18 in order to investigate the correlation between depression-related symptoms, excessive use of the internet, and participation in school and burnout. The results showed that among adolescents in both target groups, excessive use of the internet might lead to academic burnout, which can then progress to depressive symptoms (Salmela-Aro et al, 2017). The impact of feeling distressed due to the inability to access the internet and the consequences to their daily routine is reason a study that was made to 2,077 Spanish adolescents. The results indicate that 19.2% of the adolescents would be in some distress if they didn't have the ability to access the internet on a regular basis and 7.5% would be in great distress. These results show that extensive access to the internet has negative effects, causing solitude due to social anxiety, therefore it explains their choice of communicating online rather than interacting in person (de Ayala López et al., 2015). Extensive use of social media in adolescence is a developing concern. Yet another study was aimed to 2,068 Spanish adolescents between the ages of 12-19. A model viewed inadequate emotional intelligence as a limiting parameter, simulated anxiety and symptoms of depression, and extensive use of social media as a maladaptive coping mechanism. These

findings showed that feelings of anxiety and symptoms of depression were significant factors of the association between emotional intelligence and extensive use of social media (Arrivillaga et al., 2022).

Frequent or extensive use of SMU might interfere with extracurricular and social activities, thereby exposing youths to violent online behaviors, such as cyberbullying. A study of 180,919 participants was made between the ages of 11-15 among 42 countries in order to observe the relation between SMU and cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Findings showed a greater relation across countries between SMU and cyberbullying than with cybervictimization, and was more consistant in female participants. Furthermore, for both males and females, problematic media usage was associated to cyberbullying and cybervictimization in the majority of nations, with estimates indicating mild to strong effects that may require public health action (Craig et al., 2020). Through further research, a study, which includes Finland and Spain, was able to find associations between cybervictimization and victimization based on sexual harassment by friends and other youths with online dating applications (Kaakinen et al., 2021), while another study reported that 20.8% of Finnish participants and 18.3% of Spanish participants between the ages 15-25 were cybervictimized (Mikkola et al., 2022).

In Figure 4 a template was formed in order to be able to see the comparative analysis of Social Media effects in Finland and in Spain between the studies.

Figure 4. Comparative Analysis of Social Media effects in Finland and Spain

Effects	Finland	Spain
Internet Addiction and Mental Health	• 1.3% with some serious addiction problems • 22.9% with moderate addiction • 75.8% with average internet use	• 7.5% would be in great distress if they didn't have the ability to access the internet on a regular basis • 19.2% would be in some distress • 75.3% spent the most time on social networks • 31.7% accessed chatrooms and forums • 14.2% accessed photo-sharing websites • 9.1% virtual worlds
Mobile Phone use	• 100% actively use social media networks	• 90% actively use social media networks • 38% increase of mobile use • 39% owned a tablet • 27.1% owned a smartphone
Online Gaming and Gambling use	• 19% were susceptible to problem gambling • 46% females spent an excessive amount of time using social media • 23% males spent an excessive amount of time playing games online • 6% males spent an excessive amount of time gambling	• 76% had a high gambling popularity rate • 8.45% had internet gaming disorders
Well-being	• 27.08% were of intense SMU in relation to SMU with well-being • 10.16% were of problematic SMU • 33.5% females belonged to a moderate risk regarding frequency of social media use and addiction causing health issues • 9.4% belonged to problematic social media use	• 38.37% of intense SMU • 14.17% of problematic SMU

Answering to Research Questions

Is social media safe for youths to use?

There may be different points of views whether social media is safe for youths to use. In recent years, internet use has increased tremendously, as social media and smartphones are now an essential component of our daily routine. Meanwhile, adolescents start having access to the internet at very young age. There are several risks that may occur to young people between 9-15 years old. These include individual security, stolen identities, concerns about privacy, access to inappropriate content, isolation from society, and an increase in mental well-being issues such as despair, nervousness, and insufficient sleep. In addition, a substantial threat of cyberbullying exists towards adolescents. At least some of these risks may occur because of insufficient supervision by adults and guardians' lack of knowledge regarding online safety protocols. Furthermore, restrictive intervention has reduced, suggesting that parental

techniques shift away from establishing restrictions and regulations towards steering adolescents' internet use (Kalmus et al., 2022).

On the other hand, social media may furnish youth with useful contacts and better friendships, while it may also increase opportunities to diversity and participation, and reduce feelings of loneliness (Dyer, 2018). Nevertheless continuous internet access offers virtually endless opportunities to search and utilize online information, as well as forming social groups with similar interests and ideologies. A significant issue is the influence of social media groups in the formation of harmful behavior. Many harmful trends and behavioral patterns occur in adolescence stage, such as those related to emothional distress or eating disorders (Sirola et al., 2021).

While youths use social media more than older adults, a relation was found between higher social media use and with significantly lower emotional and social health in younger adults relative to older adults. These findings may imply variations adolescents and older adults interact with social media, as well as the relative use of social media in different stages of adulthood (Sharifian et al., 2021).

Should schools educate students and parents about social media's, its risks and how it can affect them?
Parents play a significant role in a family, since they are the ones guiding their children throughout their childhood until they reach adulthood. It is to the parents' authority to educate their children about principles, social expectations and dispositions. One important role of the parents is to help children develop social media awareness, by allowing them to socialise and play, while leaving certain features out, in order to protect them from potential threats (Kalmus et al., 2022). They need to empasize to adolescents which information and content are safe to share online, expecially with people they don't know and what kind of photos they can upload (Mikkola et al., 2022). However, across many nations, the accelerated advancement of technology weakens parental capabilities (Kalmus et al., 2022). For that matter, a suggestion was made that young adolescents and their parents should educate themselves to social media marketing, in order to become more literate media consumers (Dunlop et al., 2026). Nevertheless, guardians and educational facilities reveal an overall lack of control and participation, as today's youth is left unattended to explore the social media environment (Benson et al., 2019). Supporting knowledge is an important stage towards mindful social media use. Still, despite the ongoing efforts to educate young people, regarding compulsive use threats, many are concerned about the negative effects technology might have on excessive social users (Benson et al., 2019).

Preventative measures and awareness are needed in order to restrict cyberbullyng and problematic social media use as well as communicating with strangers to be able to protect youth from these threats.

Especially, contuinued exposure to social media use, among girls, may increase the risk of cybervictimization (Craig et al., 2020), particularly when they reveal details about themselves. Nonetheless, this does not mean disengaging adolescents from social media services or the internet, since it could lead them to be disconnected from peer groups that stimulate their well-being (Mikkola et al., 2022).

Researchers, educators, parents and youth cannot emphasize enough how important media education is and they all agree that it is the school's duty to inform students about the threats and dangers of social media network and to demonstrate to them ways to use them safely. However, in existing educational resources, there is an absence of rigorous assessment results, academic foundation and coverage of all the specific risks that teenagers may face on social network (Vanderhoven et al., 2014). What's more, educating youth about safe online attitudes, such as privacy and security, would be essential in order to reduce and prevent dangers (Kaakinen et al., 2021)

Conclusions

The purpose of this research being conducted was to primarily define and better understand the terms and uses of internet and social media, identify the types of social media that are being used and the impact they have on people's behavior, primarily focusing on European youth followed by a comparison of two European countries. The social media effects that were identified were: internet addiction, mental health, mobile phone use, online gaming and gambling use, sleeping patterns, well-being and marketing. By conducting further research, we can observe that more studies can take place, due to the fact that there are still some gaps between some correlations that haven't been able to acquire sufficient results.

Throughout this research that was extended in order to see whether there were similarities or differences between two European countries with different cultures and demographics, a higher association has been observed of social media to problem gambling in Spain than in Finland. In Spain, a significant relation was noticed between social media communication and extensive internet use and in all countries, users with problematic SMU were negatively associated with their well-being. In Finland, findings showed a relation between problematic gaming behavior and mental and health issues, while some of the symptoms included depression, anxiety, sleep disruption and exhaustion. The study showed a negative association between problematic gaming habit and a range of subjective health issues, while in Spain the idea that IGDs can coexist with other psychological issues. Additionally, this study showed a link between IGDs and family issues, supporting the idea that interpersonal functioning is impaired, while there was an association with aggression, impulsiveness and time spent playing. Another observation was

made that excessive use of the internet in Finland might lead to academic burnout, which can then progress to depressive symptom, while in Spain extensive access to the internet caused solitude due to social anxiety, which therefore explains their choice of communicating online rather than interacting in person. Findings showed that anxiety and symptoms of depression were significant factors of the association between emotional intelligence and extensive use of social media.

Even though there are positive outcomes when using the internet, there can also be negative impacts, such as harming people's well-being and expressing compulsive behavior by constantly being on the internet, which can impair communication skills (O'Reilly, 2016). The use of the internet increases at a great speed globally, especially among youth, therefore, it is important for young people and their guardians to be aware of the risks, in order to prevent a potential disorder such as internet addiction (Kaltiala-Heino et al, 2004). Social media frequency use in youth, corporate brands and organizations that promote health have never before seen opportunities to target and interact with young audiences. The impact of social media is less clear than that of traditional media, which is known to have both positive and negative impact on youth health behaviors (Dunlop et al., 2026). Spending time online takes away from face-to-face time with family and friends. Previous studies observed a connection between increased internet use and depression and lonely feelings. When people spend too much time online, they may become lonely because they prioritize their virtual relationships over their offline ones. Everyone seems to want to uphold and support their sense of self-worth. Self-esteem is influenced by social acceptance and approval as well as environmental control. Teenagers may receive both from online interactions because social network profiles give them the ability to decide what information they want others to know about them (Apaolaza et al., 2013).

The relation between negative content and subjective well-being, despite some research on online risks and young people, has not been examined. Social network sites make it possible to interact, find information and consume cultural products in both advantageous and detrimental ways. It's possible that cultural differences don't always accurately predict online behavior. Online content that promotes harm is user-generated, readily available and viewed by many young people. Such content may have different effects on young people than viewing traditional media because current online behavior is based on social interaction. Since these communities can and do influence many of people's lives and consequently their well-being, it is crucial to understand the potential effects of harm-advocating and extreme online communities, as well as the relative ease with which young people may come into contact with this material (Keipi et al., 2017).

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