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Social media & subjectivity: Adolescent lived experiences with social media in a Southern California middle school

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media (SM) platforms among adolescents has raised concerns over its role in increased adverse physical and mental health conditions. However, current research linking SM use with adolescent health relies on tenuous correlational associations, disproportionately focuses on harmful effects of its use, and seldom examines the perspectives of youth themselves (Odgers and Jensen, 2020; Schönning et al., 2020). This article examines adolescent lived experience in relation to SM platform engagement. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 among 75 middle-school adolescents living in an ethnically diverse and low-income Southern California community, we examine adolescent subjective experiences with SM platforms that illuminate adolescent concerns during this developmental stage. By attending to adolescent subjectivity, this article reveals the ways in which engagement with SM platforms is inextricable from cultural, social, political, and socio-emotional milieu.

1. Introduction

I (first author) met Maddie, a Mexican-American 6th-grader, in Fall (2021) at her Southern California middle school. She lived with her mother, little sister, and relatives from Tijuana B.C., Mexico. Her grandmother served as her primary caretaker while her mother worked in hospice care. Her incarcerated father's upcoming release was instigating feelings of fear that he might be strict with her at home. Over the course of my interviews, Maddie's family environment changed significantly, as did her interpersonal school relationships. In October, her grandmother made the difficult decision to travel to Tijuana for the funeral of a relative who passed away from COVID-19-related complications, rendering her unable to legally return to California. Maddie not only grieved her grandmother's absence, but she also experienced the successive loss of two relatives in Tijuana. Months later, Maddie learned that her mother had become pregnant on a conjugal visit and experienced distress over a potential exacerbation of existing tensions at home.

Maddie described school as "a little hard, boring, and tiring." Nonetheless, she enjoyed "the drama" of the school environment characterized by frequent physical fights and gossip about romantic relationships. Maddie herself had been in fights and was the subject of rumors due to her relationship with Tony, a popular 7th-grader. In an

interview, Maddie showed me a comment from a popular "school confessions" TikTok account, where a student posted that they "could be a better girlfriend to Tony than [she] could." After this "confession" post, I observed Maddie passionately kissing Tony in the school yard. Maddie's appearance also significantly transformed. Whereas at the beginning of the school year she dressed in long-sleeve t-shirts and jeans, by mid-year she wore cleavage-accentuating halter tops, heavily ripped-up jeans, acrylic nails, false eyelashes, and heavy makeup. She hoped to one day marry Tony and live in New York, though she frequently worried that he might "leave" her. When I asked how she would describe herself to others, she replied, "I'm on the phone a lot, always on call with my boyfriend."

Maddie's case foregrounds the complexity of socio-environmental factors that intertwine with social media (SM) use among adolescents in her community. Her experiences reveal the salience of school campus dynamics embedded within broader socio-political conditions, traversing from exponential rates of incarceration to ramifications of border policies on transnational families, to gender-based disparities. Her case compellingly illuminates her desires as inextricably woven within her everyday social and emotional milieu, which for her is often marked by subjective experiences of fear, loss, and anxiety. In particular, SM constitutes a significant dimension of daily life, at times operating in

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an obfuscated and less-articulated role from the perspectives of youth, and other times catapulted to the forefront of their social relationships, goals, and identities. Maddie's experiences with SM lay bare the intricacies of its embeddedness within the larger community setting and point to critical intersecting domains of the sociocultural context of adolescent lived experience and SM engagement.

Limited ethnographic attention has been paid to the role of SM in the everyday lives of adolescents despite growing public health concerns about its impacts on adolescent wellbeing. To date, research on this topic has been hampered by a disproportionate focus on harmful effects of adolescent SM use on health, and by an overreliance on statistical analyses of quantitative data instead of multidisciplinary approaches that incorporate adolescents' own experiences with SM platforms. In this article, we argue that scientific research approaches to adolescent SM use require empirical study of its meanings from the position of adolescents, and the incorporation of theoretical approaches that examine cultural, social, political, and socio-emotional processes integral to adolescent SM platform engagement.

1.1. Adolescent social media use

The bulk of studies on SM use among adolescents investigate risks for adverse health conditions. "Excessive" time online has been linked with sleep disturbances (Lund et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019), reduced physical activity (Shimoga et al., 2019), mental health conditions including depression and anxiety (Keles et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2018), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders (Boer et al., 2020; Ra et al., 2018), and decreased academic performance (Evers et al., 2020; Paulich et al., 2021). Frequent time online has been investigated as a form of addiction that can cause brain alterations similarly observed in gambling and substance abuse addictions (He et al., 2017), and as potentially conducive to developmental delays in communication and problem-solving skills (Takahashi et al., 2023).

Alongside public health concerns of frequent time online, is the potential risk of adolescent exposure to harmful content on SM platforms. Researchers have called for increased studies on the effects of SM use on female and LGBTQ + adolescents following findings that suggest increased susceptibility to online harassment and cyberbullying (Alhajji et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2015). Scholars suggest that developmental processes in early adolescence such as increased attunement toward peer acceptance may adversely intersect with SM images of "idealized" body types, potentially leading to body image concerns particularly among girls (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2020; Kleemans et al., 2018). Furthermore, Orben et al. (2022) find sex differences in developmental sensitivity to SM that occur at an earlier age for girls than for boys warranting increased attention to the effects of online content. Fears of youth exposure to potentially damaging content led the U.S. Surgeon General to warn of an "urgent crisis" of mental health impacts of SM use (U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023), with several states implementing parental consent requirements for youth SM accounts to enhance safety online (Office of the Governor, State of Arkansas, 2023; Office of the Governor, State of California, 2022).

Despite heightened public health attention to health effects of adolescent SM use, reviews of available literature reveal methodological limitations of studies that construe time online as a causal factor in adolescent health outcomes (Odgers et al., 2020; Odgers and Jensen, 2020; Orben and Przybylski, 2019; Schønning et al., 2020). Furthermore, screen time effects are often analyzed in binary terms as beneficial/harmful or positive/negative which reduce the complexity of adolescent SM use. Various studies suggest that use and impacts of SM use are mediated by numerous factors including individual patterns of use, pre-existing social and mental health challenges, and sociodemographic factors such as race, class, gender, and sexual identities (Odgers, 2018; Seabrook et al., 2016; Underwood and Ehrenreich, 2017). Nesi et al. (2022) note that adolescents' emotional responses to their experience of SM may be more relevant than their time online.

1.2. Ethnographic attention to Adolescent social media use

Research which includes adolescents' own perspectives sheds light on adolescent evaluations of both positive and negative impacts of SM platforms on wellbeing (O'Reilly, 2020), and the ways they make strategic decisions surrounding their SM presence (Harness et al., 2022). While adolescents are aware of risks for online bullying and harassment (Martin et al., 2018), they also articulate that connecting to SM provides opportunities for social support, especially among marginalized youth identities (Selkie et al., 2020; Kauer et al., 2014). Among the few studies that focus on girls' experiences with SM, Burnette et al. (2017) found that girls were critical of altered online images, avoiding content perceived as damaging to their self-esteem.

These findings suggest that research on SM practices requires ethnographic attention to adolescent lived experiences. To date, the limited ethnographic studies on adolescent SM use illuminate the everyday realities youth face offline. In these works, SM is engaged by adolescents to interact with peers to reach their social goals (Boyd, 2008), navigate parental surveillance and regulations (Fongkaew and Fongkaew, 2016), challenge extant racism and exclusion in local community settings (Gatwiri and Moran, 2023; Rickman, 2018) and stay informed on local neighborhood issues (Ilbury, 2022). In this way, ethnographic attention to SM practices uncovers facets of adolescents' daily lives that extend beyond reductionist or binary perspectives of its impact on health.

For the present study, elsewhere we examined the mental health status of students in relation to levels of depression and anxiety (Jenkins et al., 2022). That analysis underscored the methodological requirement to consider the sociocultural milieu for dimensions of adolescent subjectivity. Ethnographic attention to subjectivity emphasizes experience as central to orientations toward self, others, and the environment, and as fundamentally intersubjective (Csordas, 1997; Jenkins and Barrett, 2004). Focusing on human experience provides a lens into modes of "being-in-the-world" (Csordas, 2002) whereby individuals make sense of, reflect upon, and fashion dimensions of their selves over the course of interactions with others. Research attention to subjectivity has been particularly fruitful in revealing "what is most at stake" (Kleinman, 2007) for individuals as a matter of emotional salience and human intentionality and agency particularly in social environments marked by structural violence (gender, economic, racial, political) (Biehl et al., 2007; Farmer, 2004).

The interpersonal dynamics of SM use as inherently intersubjective allow for deeper inspection of the ways adolescents' social relationships taking place both online and offline influence everyday physical and emotional experiences. Through this approach, we can uncover the meanings behind SM practices, and of particular "content" assessed by adolescents as useful, important, or trivial in their lives. We argue that research on adolescents therefore requires an attention to individual experience in relation to structural, cultural, and relational features of the social milieu (James, 2007; Korbin and Anderson-Fye, 2011; Sobo, 2015). In this article, our analytic focus on lived experience sheds light on the ways SM engagement reveals moral and emotional features of everyday life, and what matters most to adolescents during this developmental stage. Such a focus reveals critical points of intersection between SM engagement and adolescent subjectivity.

2. Methods

The data presented in this article are drawn from an ethnographic, multi-method study conducted in 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 in a low-income, ethnically-diverse Southern California, U.S.A. community setting. This study was designed to examine the daily lives of youth focusing on adolescent wellbeing under conditions of socio-structural adversity. Here, we focus on adolescent SM use as one domain of inquiry from this broader study.

We commenced research procedures in Fall (2018) recruiting parents

of 10–14-year-old youth at a school orientation. Two research team members recruited participants, conducting consent procedures in accordance with our approved Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Research protocol #171596. We collected written informed consent from parents, and written assent forms from adolescents. We emphasized that participation was voluntary, confidential, with no impact on academic standing. All participants were informed of withdrawal procedures. Following a year-and-a-half of fieldwork, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak led to follow-up phone interviews with a subset of students. We returned in Fall (2021), recruiting an additional 30 student participants.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, sociodemographic forms, and psychological assessment scales. Sociodemographic data included household composition, gender, race/ethnicity, SM platform use (which platforms, and daily time spent), and technology at home. Ethnographic observations occurred at school and the local neighborhood. Interview topics included relationships with parents, peers, and teachers; conceptions of physical/mental health; current events; future dreams; and use of SM. 1–8 interviews lasting 35–45 min were conducted with students during elective periods in a private office over the course of one year. The total number of student interviews was contingent upon the time needed to complete research procedures. Interviews were audio-recorded for transcription analysis. Although the total N was 83, our analyses are based upon 75 students for whom all research procedures were completed. Procedures were not completed for eight students due to school relocations, class conflicts, or disinterest in continued participation.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and adolescent descriptions of SM use were aggregated into a code report in NVivo Coding Analysis software (QSR International, 1995) by research team members. The report was analyzed for thematic development by the authors who in consultation with each other developed the interpretation of themes. Drawing from person-centered ethnography (Levy and Hollan, 1998), which takes as its focal point individual experience to understand how humans make sense of the world, we focused on how adolescents describe experiences on SM platforms. Rather than collecting and analyzing general youth conceptions of SM and health, this analytic approach is grounded in the lives and experiences of adolescents.

We generated data tables summarizing total counts and percentages of SM platform use. Field notes were analyzed for SM-related themes. Employing these complementary methods provides a comparative view that may contradict or confirm observations from ethnographic methods and provides greater understanding of SM in adolescents' lives. Together, these data provide an empirical description of the centrality of SM in the lives of middle school students.

3. Ethnographic setting, Adolescent characteristics & social media use

Adolescents live in a Southern California city near the U.S./Mexico border zone. Per census demographics, this city consists of Euro-American and Hispanic/Latino populations followed by Black, Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Indigenous and multiracial populations, and a community of migrant agricultural workers from Central and Northern Mexico. Reports on the financial status of the county reveal that poverty rates remain higher than before the Great Recession. Rising housing costs, gentrification, gang violence, and racialized economic disparities characterize this community setting. The school where we conducted research serves 6th–8th grade youth (10–14 years) of primarily low-income families and qualifies for state programs reserved for underserved communities including reduced/no-cost lunch meals and mentoring programs to improve school retention. Although the specific number is unknown, a significant number of undocumented-status adults and children live in this neighborhood where border enforcement vans frequently patrol. A police officer also routinely

patrols the school and conducts backpack searches for concealed weapons or drug possession.

Table 1 summarizes adolescent participant sociodemographic characteristics. The mean age was 11.2 with most students in 6th grade. More than 70% of participants are ethnically diverse/hybrid, with more than half identifying as Mexican-descent, most of whom maintain cross-border ties. Parents primarily work in skilled trades such as construction. More than half of adolescents have at least one military-affiliated family member. At least eight students have had incarcerated relatives.

Survey reports of SM use among U.S. middle school-aged adolescents are limited and suggest that a significant proportion are not connected to SM platforms compared to high-school-aged youth (Vogels et al., 2022). Among the two surveys that we could identify, the widely cited Common Sense Census Survey Report (2021) finds that less than half (38%) of 8–12-year-olds have ever connected to SM platforms (Rideout et al., 2022), while Clark et al. (2021), find that approximately half (49%) of 10–12-year-old youth connect to SM platforms. This varies from what we observed in our study since the majority of adolescents report utilizing at least one SM platform (Table 2). 70.7% of participants report using at least one SM platform while 26.7% state that they do not connect to SM platforms but utilize YouTube. YouTube is the most accessed SM platform among this cohort (84.9%) which is also the case among 13–17-year-olds in the U.S. (Anderson et al., 2023). YouTube is followed by Snapchat (43.8%) and Instagram (32.8%) in popularity among this sample. The prominence of these three platforms is consistent with middle schoolers' SM use observed in the Southeastern region of the United States (Martin et al., 2018). TikTok was launched while this

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics (N = 75).

Characteristics	N	%
Sex		
Female	38	50.7
Male	37	49.3
Age (# of years)		
Mean (SD)	11.2 (0.74)	
Range	10–14	
Grade Level		
Mean (SD)	6.21 (0.58)	
Range	6–8	
Ethnic Background^a		
Mexican-Descent	41	54.7
Euro-American	32	42.7
African American/Black	10	13.3
Central American	5	6.7
Pacific Islander	4	5.3
South Asian	3	4.0
East Asian	3	4.0
Native American	2	2.7
Parent/Guardian Occupations^b		
Skilled Trade (construction, etc.)	23	30.7
Clerical Work (receptionists, etc.)	21	28.0
Retail/Customer Service	17	22.7
Healthcare (nursing, etc.)	12	16.0
Stay at Home	11	14.7
Restaurant/Food Service	10	13.3
Housekeeping/Hospitality	9	12.0
Military (currently serving)	5	6.7
Education (teachers)	5	6.7
Unemployed	5	6.7
Public Service (firefighter, postal etc.)	4	5.3
Retired	4	5.3
Real Estate	1	1.3
Familial Military Affiliations^b		
Currently Serving	16	21.7
Veterans	28	37.8
Currently Serving and Veterans	4	5.4
None	26	35.1

^a Totals exceed 100% to reflect identification with multiple ethnic backgrounds.

^b Missing Data (n = 1).

Table 2
Social media (SM) characteristics (N = 75).

Characteristics	N	%
Do you use SM? (such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook etc.)		
Yes (at least one SM platform)	53	70.7
No (except for YouTube)	20	26.7
None	2	2.6
Social Media Platforms^a		
YouTube	62	84.9
Snapchat	32	43.8
Instagram	24	32.8
Musical.ly/TikTok	18	24.6
Discord	5	6.8
Facebook	5	6.8
Twitter	3	4.1
Twitch	3	4.1
Tumblr	1	1.3
Amino	1	1.3
Reddit	1	1.3
Self-Reported Time Spent on SM^b		
Less than an hour	20	37.8
1–2 h	14	26.4
2–3 h	8	15.1
3–5 h	5	9.4
6 + hours	6	11.3

^a Totals exceed 100% to reflect use of multiple platforms.

^b Total includes students who responded yes to SM use, N = 53.

study was ongoing, though several students were using its predecessor called Musical.ly (24.6%). Less commonly used were the platforms Discord (6.8%), Facebook (6.8%), Twitter and Twitch (4.1% each), Tumblr (1.3%), Amino, (1.3%) and Reddit (1.3%). Female students reported accessing more SM platforms, specifically Instagram and Snapchat.

Several factors may contribute to the high percentage of self-reported SM platform use among adolescents in our study relative to published survey data. First, is that the age-range of adolescents in this study is lower than that in published literature. Since the students at this school range from 11 to 13 years of age, incoming 6th graders are introduced to the popularity of SM use among older students which may compel SM connection. Second, through peer interactions, youth engage with SM platforms in relation to other forms of media entertainment in their lives, such as seeking video-gaming tips and following celebrity pages. Third, the majority of youth in this study live with, or in close proximity to, extended relatives with whom the use of SM may be a form of entertainment during moments of family interaction, as noted by several adolescents.

Adolescent responses regarding the use of YouTube reflect a broader methodological question surrounding what is defined as a SM platform. Current survey reports vary in their definition of YouTube as a SM platform which may reflect ambiguity regarding its perception as a SM site. It is important to note that YouTube use among adolescents may vary such that its use might or might not be perceived as akin to other SM platforms. Adolescents in our study describe using YouTube for a range of activities including viewing content, commenting, posting, liking, and following other accounts. As such, some adolescents in our study perceived YouTube as a SM site, despite others not counting it as a SM platform. Moreover, SM surveys based upon parental responses (Clark et al., 2021) may not reflect accurate adolescent practices of SM platform connection. Since most SM platforms have an age requirement of 13 to create an account, some adolescents may connect without parental knowledge. For example, several students in our study admitted to secretly connecting to SM platforms without parental consent.

The greatest proportion of students who endorsed using SM platforms connected to platforms for less than an hour (26.7%), with the second-highest proportion (18.7%) connecting 1–2 h per day. Adolescent self-reports of SM use are not clear-cut however, since studies note

the limitations of self-reported data on SM use as participants may over- or underestimate their time online (Boyle et al., 2022; Junco, 2013). Youth may also intentionally avoid sharing how long they connect due to shame or embarrassment. Based on our data, self-reported use can also be influenced by conceptions of what counts as SM as well as parental prohibitions of specific platforms, phone-use restrictions, or limited school Wi-Fi service.

4. What matters to adolescents

4.1. Rumors, fights & “shipping”: “I want to be in the know”

As Maddie described, “the drama” that ensued based on gossip was a source of anxiety and excitement at school. For students prohibited from utilizing Instagram and Snapchat, the social repercussions of not “being in the know” often led them to circumvent parental controls on devices. Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are valued as sources of information-sharing and communication on topics relevant to adolescents’ social networks, playing a predominant role in peer group discussions. Part of the concern with “being in the know” stems from the circulation of campus gossip. “Tea” accounts on Instagram are one such medium created anonymously to post gossip about specific students. These account names originate from the phrases “spilling” or “serving the tea,” referring to the dissemination of rumors and insider information.

“Confessions” and “Shipping” accounts are popular on Instagram and Snapchat to post anonymous comments about student crushes or relationships. “Shipping” (short for relationship) accounts involve posting side-by-side pictures of students, with captions asking commentators to reply with “ship” (yes, they should form a relationship) or “dip” (no, they should not be together). These may refer to existing relationships or new pairing suggestions. Posts can include pictures of students from neighboring schools and those without SM accounts.

Rachel, a 6th-grader, experienced confusion and discomfort when she was “shipped” on Instagram with a student at another school:

“At first, I thought it was funny, cause I didn’t know who that was, but then I was kinda uncomfortable cause the picture of me ... I was doing a dance move. So, it was kinda weird, [...] I took a video of my friend and me dancing, but it wasn’t really a picture unless somebody screenshotted it.”

Rachel expressed concern that the picture was one she herself had never posted, possibly a screenshot from a video she made with her friend. Several other students experienced anxiety over pictures posted without consent that were subsequently disseminated for others to “comment” on. While the posting of pictures is worrisome for students, particularly when they are not posting them themselves, the “comments” section of these platforms can create subjective experiences of anxiety, sadness, and anger. This is because, in addition to posts aimed at soliciting commentaries on couples, practices of social evaluation extend onto appearance-based rankings, as with the “ugly girls of school” Instagram account. Such commentary, taking place at school and online, undergirds the high frequency of fights across grade levels at this school, and relays practices of social hierarchy formation relating to who belongs with whom as a matter of public opinion.

The causes for outbreaks of fights include in-person or online insults (“you’re ugly,” “stupid,” “short”), homophobic and racial slurs, offensive remarks about clothing styles or body image, or derogatory remarks about parents. Rumors or insults from “fake friends” also spur altercations on campus which are recorded and posted online. The prominence of fights resulting from rumors and insults compelled students to limit drawing attention to themselves.

Jake, a 6th-grader who was “shipped” online, had a failing grade in his P.E. class during distance learning for keeping his camera off. When I asked him his reasoning, he replied:

"It's awkward 'cause people can have the camera on and record you doing your work-out. It's not really comfortable. Otherwise, if it was in person, I think I would have a better grade [...] I wish there was a way I could have my camera on, but not show my face ... People have recorded teachers and, like, students [...] they just post it on social media."

Jake described that Zoom screenshots of students were posted on SM platforms for others to "comment on." Jake's experience reflects a deeper entanglement between peer conflict (online and offline) and academic performance. Although students were not attending in-person classes during COVID-19 quarantine, social dynamics of peer conflict continued online. Jake's case illuminates the desperation to avoid becoming the subject of negative commentary at the cost of decreased academic grades. Indeed, several students noted that absences from school were often employed strategically to avoid such conflict. Meanwhile, the perpetual "drama" at school (fights and rumors) also encourages attendance for students like Maddie, who express a desire to be "in the know" and participate in gossip.

Despite these peer tensions related to SM posts, only three students consider that they have had negative SM experiences. School policies outline recommendations for students who experience cyberbullying, including exiting SM platforms or reporting incidents to an adult. However, students observe that even if account owners "get in trouble," the accounts reappear under different usernames. Thus, while students report knowledge of steps to take if they experience cyberbullying, many seldom take action, and the social perception of those who report bullying of any kind can be stigmatizing.

Online rumors result in dissemination of information (true or untrue) beyond immediate network spheres. Eliot, a 6th grader, experienced multiple rumors spread about him following a romantic and peer group break-up. Eliot describes his experience with these rumors:

"I don't really care if people know about a breakup. People didn't really talk about that. But Stacey contacted Ariel asking if she had any rumors to spread. Ariel said 'no,' and Stacey was like 'what happened to the friend group?' ... and Ariel said, 'oh yeah, Eliot broke up with Jenny,' [...] So, apparently, Stacey went around saying 'oh yeah, Eliot cheated on Jenny.' [...] Stacey saying I cheated happened because I ended up on one of the school's ship pages. So, I made a whole Instagram account just so I could see. [...]"

Rumor topics include romantic and friend-group break-ups, altercations, flirting with someone in another relationship, and/or cheating allegations. The content of rumors illuminates what may be deemed culturally salacious, taboo, or breached as a matter of cultural expectation and norm. In Eliot's case, although he expressed that he "didn't care" about the rumors regarding his break-up, the risk of being perceived as a "cheater" bore more concern for him as a matter of social reputation. Stacey's solicitation of gossip as a normalized practice reveals that rumor propagation is expected, and that the content of what is said and posted bears more weight because of how it might shift, alter, or confirm existing social relations.

4.2. Expressed emotion & virtual Intersubjectivity: "I'm always alone, so I just go on my phone"

Mia, a soft-spoken 6th-grader from Tijuana, B.C., Mexico moved to Southern California with her mother when she was 8 years old. In elementary school, she was bullied by peers due to her ethnic background and dark arm hair. Furthermore, her documentation status prevented her from visiting dearly missed relatives in Tijuana. Mia often experiences loneliness at home with her mother, whom she describes as someone who "wakes up angry." In describing their relationship, Mia recounts frustratedly:

When we go to a mall she's always on her phone. And at bed, when it's free time, she's always on her phone. When she's going to work,

she's always on her phone. When she's watching a movie, she's on her phone. And I say, 'stop looking at your phone and we can watch the movie' and she says 'okay' then she will put the phone back. And when we're watching the movie, she'll grab it [...] she's always on her phone when I want to do things with her.

Mia's frustration resonates with adolescents who notice that their parents appear distracted on phones during times meant for family conviviality. These frustrations are simultaneously a lamentation about a perceived lack of affective presence. This admonishment bears striking resemblance to Tijuana adolescent experiences of loneliness occurring within familial emotional atmospheres of absence, disconnection, and perceived lack of care and attention in familial *convivencia* (being-with) (Jenkins et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2019). Articulations of "always being on the phone" convey less of a concern with the impacts of frequent online engagement on an individual, but rather relay a moral concern with the breaching of expected interpersonal interactions within family life.

While students lament what they perceive as frequent parental phone use, adolescents themselves connect to platforms to mitigate subjective experiences of loneliness, boredom, sadness, anxiety, and anger. When Mia feels lonely and sad, she asks Siri for jokes, sends messages to friends, or searches for comedy on SM platforms. Bonding with friends or creating connections online is a common practice among youth in this study. Taylor, an 11-year-old, shares her experiences with her friend, Brian, online:

We were literally playing Roblox over a call on Snapchat ... then in the middle of the call, we just start crying together ... because [Brian's] family is like 'you got to be tough, you're a boy, you can't be like crying and stuff.' He gets a lot of emotion from that, ... So, in the middle of the calls, we just both cry and talk about our problems. It's a good thing, it's a good thing ... we just cry about our problems. I just like someone to talk to when you're crying ... and we just do that.

While adolescents connect to certain platforms seeking specific content, the affective interactions that take place online disclose ongoing emotional spheres within their interpersonal settings. In Taylor's and Brian's case, connecting online evolved into an opportunity to express emotions and share existing problems. Their interactions online are influenced by their physical and affective atmospheres at home marked by pressure and strain, creating a "virtual" interaction allowing for connection, release, and care. These kinds of interactions reveal what youth feel they can express across their socio-emotional spheres. For instance, Taylor and Brian have separate friend groups and rarely intermingle at school. However, they bond beyond the confines of school-based peer groups, reaching for forms of connection that may otherwise be inaccessible within existing peer and kin relationships.

Brianna, an 8th-grader, shared a similar experience describing how she befriended an out-of-state adolescent through a SM platform. Brianna speaks with this friend often, sharing experiences from home and school. She enjoys speaking with her about her problems because she is comforted by her friend's responses:

She'll say things to help me get through it, cause sometimes I don't like it when people try telling me [to be] positive. I don't really feel comfortable with it, like I know I have to be positive. She kind of comforts me. She's like 'hey, it's gonna be okay, I'm here if you wanna talk, try to take a nap and take some alone time and we can stream music online.' Things like that help a lot when she does it.

A fundamental aspect that Brianna values about her online friend is that she offers support that she finds comforting and useful. In contrast, she feels her school friends dismiss her problems, which include violent arguments with her father. Rather than encouraging positivity, her online friend offers suggestions to manage her emotional experiences. In Taylor's and Brianna's cases, online friendships are removed from the

immediate peer group that students engage with at school. This separation may be desirable, given the intensity of gossip at school. Trust and loyalty are highly valued features of friendships among this cohort, partly because of their precarity within the context of frequent rumor circulation. The qualities that adolescents enjoy about their online friends unveil what, as a matter of cultural orientation, is socially acceptable to share with peers in particular contexts, and what is met with stigmatizing repercussions.

That expressions of distress and sadness are often met with dismissive or insensitive responses within peer and family settings illuminates mental health stigma, undergirding the ethos of their school and home lives. For instance, adolescent references to self-harm or sadness in online posts are often perceived by peers as attention-seeking. Internet memes minimizing the seriousness of depression are often circulated among peers during break times. Students dressed in “emo” style clothing (black clothes and black makeup) are subject to “wrist-check” sneers; derogatory remarks insinuating a student’s wrist should be inspected for signs of self-harm. Given the features of this environment, rather than forming online relationships due to a lack of “in-person” friends, adolescents form social connections online based upon particular friendship qualities they aspire to have, or wish to maintain within the context of what is immediately available or unavailable to them in their specific interpersonal networks.

4.3. Political bodies & future aspirations: “I get most of my knowledge on YouTube”

Widespread concern over adolescent exposure to potentially “damaging,” or harmful content has led to research investigating the effects of sexually-explicit matter on adolescent sexual relationships and behaviors (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009; Peter and Valkenburg, 2006), effects of body image-focused content (Dane and Bhatia, 2023; Wang and Togher, 2023), and mental health implications of graphic videos depicting self-harm, physical violence, and teen suicide (Iorio and McElroy, 2020; Kelly, 2022). Despite these concerns, less attention is paid to how adolescents experience and respond to the content they consume online.

References to SM content in adolescent interviews occurred when discussing the cultivation of personal interests, as a pastime, and in relation to newsworthy trends. YouTube was perceived as a tool for engaging with topics of interest including sports, video games, make-up techniques, and for general entertainment, especially to mitigate feelings of stress or boredom. Watching soothing videos or comedy skits was a common practice in managing feelings of anxiety or anger. The content salient for adolescents intertwined with existing fears and anxieties, ranging from ways to enhance personal appearance, to feelings of anger and sadness upon reading racist and sexist comments online.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Diego, an 11-year-old zombie video game enthusiast, was feeling anxious that his parents might lose their jobs or fall ill. He recalls a Youtuber suggesting that the pandemic would result in the “rich staying rich and the poor [getting] poorer” which made him feel concerned about the possibility of exacerbated economic struggles at home. He felt paranoid after watching a clip outlining multiple events that *The Simpsons* television show had predicted. He states the video “popped up” and “caught his interest:”

Have you heard of *The Simpsons* predictions? Somehow *The Simpsons* predicted Kobe Bryant’s death ... They also predicted COVID-19 ... And you know how the people attacked The Capitol? The people in *The Simpsons* did that too ... So, it kind of got me worried cause when the election was happening, it kind of looked like an apocalypse, I guess. Not like a zombie apocalypse, but all the buildings are destroyed, so kind of like a battlefield, I guess. That kind of made me worried cause seeing what was happening [with the storming of The Capitol] it felt like it was going to happen.

Diego vividly remembers watching news coverage of the January 6th

Insurrection with his parents as it was unfolding. He worried that “actual weapons” were used, and that the familiar destruction from his video games might become reality. Since *The Simpsons* “predicted” an apocalypse following a presidential election, he worried that this might become true given previous similarities between the show and real-life events. Importantly, Diego notes that this clip “popped up,” illuminating varieties of content Diego seeks out to begin with, and that is suggested to him via SM algorithms. At home, Diego often hesitates to express fears to his parents, who ridicule his fear of the dark and urge him to “act his age.” Since Diego’s parents dismiss his fears, viewing and engaging with this content may suggest his interest to learn more and work through his anxieties, while perhaps ironically fueling them. At the same time, his fears related to the specific content he views are not solely a result of the content itself, but rather of his current living conditions, wherein this kind of media “prediction” or “coverage” can fuel existing anxieties surrounding familial economic precarity, human rights, and violence. When speaking with adolescents about news stories, certain policies resonated more with some students based upon their social identities. For instance, Mexican-descent students denounced the “build the wall” slogan. TikTok videos displaying experiences of racism were also referenced by adolescents in discussing matters of social justice and community violence.

Several female-identifying students expressed frustration with cultural expectations for the ways bodies should look. Female adolescents condemned the use of filters on pictures and the celebration of “ideal” figure types including thin waists. Eva, a 6th grader, expressed sadness and anger upon seeing online commentary of women’s bodies:

It makes me sad because it’s to the point where people feel like they’re not enough or they don’t think that they’re pretty or beautiful. Or they have bigger dreams, and they never make it just because people expect [that] you have to be a certain [body] type to be that person.

Eva’s observations of negative comments toward women’s bodies are particularly salient for her, given her own experiences of criticism directed toward her body. Her mother criticizes her weight, directs her to exercise, and restricts her eating, while her school friends comment on her weight. Although comments directed toward girls’ bodies pervade in this school setting and engender feelings of discomfort among girls, most girls who noted derogatory comments toward bigger bodies were also critical of these views in a way that displayed resistance. In this way, online content is not passively consumed, but engaged with in a way that reflects personal resonance and cultural critique.

Eva’s connection between negative comments and orientations toward the future is particularly poignant. For her, the possibility of not being considered beautiful intertwines with the kinds of dreams she feels able to aspire to. This cultural conception reveals important avenues by which media content influences what adolescents perceive as achievable or not within the context of their local community. Mia, for example, enjoys watching videos about Paris despite believing she can never visit due to her documentation status. These experiences reveal the ways future aspirations are shaped through the interplay of media content and existing sociopolitical conditions. Lena describes her future-oriented aspirations:

I put on makeup after school because I like practicing makeup because I want to maybe be a cosmetologist when I grow older. I get a lot of compliments from my friends on how I do makeup or the way I can do eyeliner or eyeshadow. A lot of cosmetologists get recognized really well and they’re able to make a lot of money, especially if they start a YouTube or Instagram. And that’s a big part of society now, so I think being a cosmetologist when I grow up could be a really fundamental thing for me.

For Lena, becoming a cosmetologist is partly informed by current talents and a desire for a lucrative trajectory. Adolescents who desire to

become influencers, streamers, or content creators emphasize the wealth they could gain based upon the trajectories of famous Youtubers and Influencers. For many students, this helps rationalize their interests and SM practices to their parents. One student won money in a local video game competition, resulting in his parents' newfound support of his streaming practices. While the proportion of those who "make it" on SM platforms may be smaller than those who don't, an important dimension of this future orientation concerns the ways in which SM presence as a tool for making money is seen as a viable and desirable future-oriented pathway in adolescence.

5. Discussion

Social media (SM) occupies a prominent role in the lives of young adolescents in our study. Adolescents engage with SM for a range of activities including information-sharing, skill development, and entertainment. Despite widespread concerns surrounding SM effects on adolescent health, our study demonstrates that SM engagement operates as an active site for expressed emotion (Jenkins, 2015; Karno et al., 1987) for adolescents and families. Ethnographic attention to adolescent SM use illuminates the cultural, social, and political milieu in which these emotionally charged exchanges take place online.

For adolescents in this study, the prominence of gossip leads to SM practices aimed at creating desirable social reputations or resisting those that are undesirable. The visual identification of individuals and the elicitation of peer evaluation in "shipping" posts reflect an explicit social judgement of dating choices in relation to social dynamics and culturally avowed expectations. This diverges from the more common SM practice of indirectly referencing the individual subject of a gossip-fueled post as found by Miller et al. (2017). Despite the difficulties this poses for adolescents, the use of SM platforms to defy "shipping" as well as to create possibilities for positive connections provides a means to counter social control of this kind of gossip.

Adolescents' dynamic engagement with SM illuminates the need to move beyond binary and reductionist assessments of SM effects on adolescent health. Focusing primarily on harmful SM effects may obscure the social dynamics that underlie SM use. Adolescents engage with SM platforms in ways that incorporate a continuum of emotional states to include boredom, sadness, anxiety, excitement, and relaxation. In this way, individual users reciprocally shape the use of, and experience with, online platforms (Miller and Slater, 2000). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, SM was cited by students as the primary means to maintain contact with friends, seek entertainment, and mitigate feelings of boredom. This was particularly the case among adolescents who described tense family and peer contexts.

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the need to expand our research focus beyond SM impacts on wellbeing, to take into account socio-structural forces that impact family and community health. Diego's and Eva's cases reveal that while adolescents may encounter racist, sexist, and violent content online, how this content resonates for each individual needs to be understood in relation to the broader "political ethos" (Jenkins, 1991, 2015) shaping everyday emotional experiences and social atmospheres. Further, the prevailing political ethos undergirds future-oriented possibilities that adolescents imagine as foreclosed, open, or ambiguous (Jenkins and Csordas, 2020). In Mia's experience, for example, she appears to have a sense of foreclosed possibilities.

Based on this ethnographic study, we conclude that research attention to adolescent *subjectivity* enriches our understanding of the interrelation between SM practices and adolescent health. This is particularly salient in the present case for youth living in conditions of strain and precarity. Broadly, we are convinced that further investigation of SM use necessarily requires exploration of the social, cultural, and political environments of SM in everyday lives.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Giselle Sanchez: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Janis H. Jenkins:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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