

**EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF A LINK, BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND
SUICIDE RISK AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: THE CASE OF ROMA COMMUNITY,
MASERU, LESOTHO**

BY

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this dissertation has been read and supervised as having met the requirements of the Faculty of Social Sciences, National University of Lesotho, for the award of a degree of Master of Science in Health and Medical Sociology.

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DECLARATION

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I declare that “Exploring perceptions of a link between social media use and suicide risk among young people: The case of Roma community, Maseru, Lesotho” is my own piece of work. All sources I have used or quoted have been indicated by complete references.

Signature

Date

DEDICATION

First, thank the Lord Almighty for His Grace in finishing this dissertation. I thereby dedicate this dissertation to my daughter Lehakoe Monica Tlalanyane, my best friend and the greatest miracle. I cherish the day I found out that you will grace my life with your presence because it was on that same day that I decided to get up and pursue every dream of mine, including this Master. You are truly my lifesaver. May this dissertation signify that you can achieve anything you set your mind on.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated views among young people in Lesotho regarding a potential connection between social media use and suicide risk. Its goal is to comprehend how young people view the connection between their social interactions and suicidal thoughts or actions.

The social comparison theory of Leon Festinger and Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide served as the foundation for this qualitative investigation. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling strategies to identify participants who resided in the Roma community. Data for the study was gathered through social media content analysis and in-person, in-depth interview guidance. The gathered information was translated into English and transcribed. The data was then subjected to thematic analysis.

According to the study's preliminary findings, social, psychological, and economic factors are the main ones that increase the risk of suicide among young people. The study also showed that sadness and mental pain are caused by a complex interaction of factors, such as social comparisons, cyberbullying, and pressure to maintain an online identity. Young people are therefore at risk for suicide since they are more susceptible to stress and sadness. Thus, it can be said that youth suicide risk is increased by active social media use, which is linked to mental health and relationship issues. To lessen the possible harmful consequences of social media, the research also emphasizes the necessity for focused mental health interventions and campaigns advocating for appropriate social media usage.

Keywords: suicide, social media, suicide risk, suicide ideation, Lesotho

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LIST OF ABBRIVIATIONS

NUL: National University of Lesotho

WHO: World Health Organization

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.0 Introduction

Suicide is a global issue with implications on several aspects of world economies, such as population. Perceptions of suicide among different communities are often deeply embedded in culture, religion, politics, and legal frameworks. The underlying objective of this chapter is to present the contextual background of the study that will be conducted on the perceptions of young people on the relationship between social media usage and suicide risk in the Roma community in Maseru, Lesotho. This chapter's contents include the study's background, a statement of the problem, the main and specific objectives, and the aligned research questions and justification of the study. The scope of the study, the definition of the concept and the limitations of the study will also form part of this chapter.

1.1 Background of the study

It is widely recognised that suicide is a major public health hazard, taking between 700,000 and 800,000 deaths annually worldwide (Luxton et al., 2012; WHO, 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) reports that suicide is the second most prevalent cause of death for young people worldwide, accounting for roughly 1.5% of all deaths and 57% of all violent deaths. The rising suicide rates are alarming people everywhere, and Lesotho is not an exception to this trend. With 87.5 suicides per 100,000 persons, Lesotho unnervingly has the highest rate of suicide among African nations (WHO, 2019).

Suicide rates exhibit significant variation across different regions, with around 80% of world suicides reported to take place in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2019). Dattani et al. (2021) highlight that certain countries in the Southern African region and Eastern Europe tend to experience high estimated suicide rates, surpassing 15 annual deaths per 100,000 individuals, while other European, South American, and Asian countries display lower suicide rates, below 10 annual deaths per 100,000 people. The escalating suicide rates have become a growing concern for numerous countries worldwide, emphasising the necessity of comprehending the contributing factors to develop effective prevention strategies. The surge in suicide rates can be attributed to the influence of social media (Intahchomphoo, 2018;

Damota, 2019). Social media has become a crucial aspect of people' lives, prompting a keen interest in its impact on mental health and overall well-being.

The lives of young individuals in the 21st century are characterised by a variety of establishments and involvements, encompassing family, social media, and education among other things (Scott, 2015). The utilisation of social media is prevalent and nearly ubiquitous among both the youth and the elderly. Over recent years, the utilisation of social media has become an indispensable component of the lives of numerous young individuals, with a significant portion of their activities and those of the older generation centred around social media (Collin et al., 2011). Some academics, such as Damota (2019), define social media as the confluence of internet-based communication platforms dedicated to community-driven input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration. As observed by Ravindran et al. (2022), social media confers advantages upon individuals by facilitating the development of communication skills, fostering friendships, facilitating the sharing of thoughts and ideas, enabling the pursuit of personal interests, keeping individuals informed with up-to-date information, and providing online employment prospects.

However, social media exists in various forms and variations. Some platforms may disseminate information that is not entirely beneficial to young people. Research has revealed a strong link between social media usage and high levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among youths (Damota, 2019). Conversely, social media platforms often cultivate an environment where young individuals engage in comparisons with others, cultivating feelings of inadequate sentiments, low self-esteem, and body image concerns (Ryding & Kuss, 2020). The constant exposure to idealised portrayals of others' lives can exacerbate depression and anxiety among young people. Moreover, cyberbullying and online harassment have a potential to flourish on social media platforms(Balt et al., 2023).

Little is known about suicide in Africa (Mars et al., 2014; Ongeru et al, 2023). However, suicide rates among youth populations, as observed in countries such as Lesotho, have been linked to various factors, including the unemployment rate of 18% and other socio-economic problems such as poverty (World Bank, 2022). Boloetse (2019) asserts that Lesotho ranks as the tenth country worldwide with the highest suicide rate and the highest in Africa. Additionally, research indicates that Lesotho has the highest

rate of suicide among females globally, which is 24.4 per 100,000, in comparison with 17.8 for males (Boloetse, 2019). Suicide attempts, such as non-fatal suicidal behaviours, are reported to be significantly more prevalent than actual suicide, estimated to occur 10-20 times more frequently (O'Connor et al., 2018).

Looking at the information discussed, suicide is a global phenomenon that has implications across various systems in society, yet most countries like Lesotho do not have proper suicide response strategies. It is in this regard that sociology as a profession takes an interest in this area due to its implications on society, social integration, cohesion, regulation, mental health, and overall well-being of people. It is, therefore, crucial to explore and recognise the perceptions that young people have regarding their social media usage patterns to guide policies designed for the reduction of suicide rates and suicide risk in Lesotho.

1.2 Statement of the problem

There has been an undeniable growth in the utilisation of smartphones in Lesotho, which has consequently increased Internet and online social media usage. In January 2022, statistical data provided by Kemp (2022) indicated that Lesotho had 1.13 million individuals utilising the Internet in a population of about 2,3 million people, of which 532 thousand were active social media users. Thus, these statistics demonstrate that approximately 24.5% of Basotho engage in social media networks, and the research survey reveals that Facebook was the most utilised social media platform in Lesotho (Kemp, 2022). These online social media websites give users a chance to set up an online persona and interact with others, including strangers, thereby leading to the establishment of a media network with both negative and positive results on people.

Lesotho has one of the highest suicide rates per capita (possibly the highest) in the world (Boloetse, 2019; Lombard, 2024). Some scholars, such as Ts'episo Siseoana, have addressed the causes of suicide in Lesotho, attributing the increase in suicide rates to factors such as unemployment, poverty, and the incapacity of government (BBC Africa, 2023). Moreover, in an interview by Lombard, a journalist for BBC Africa, a social worker who specialises in providing group sessions to young people in Leribe, Lesotho, noted that in Lesotho, suicide rates among young people can be attributed to factors such as rape, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse. Limited attention has been given to the role played by other factors, such as social media, on the

exacerbation of suicide rates. Consequently, this study aims to discover whether social media is another factor which puts young people at risk of suicide in Lesotho, a small mountainous nation with a population of 2,330,318 million individuals (United Nations, 2023).

1.3 Objectives of the study

The study aimed to achieve the objectives that follow:

1.3.1 General objective

The guiding objective of this study is “to explore perceptions of a link between social media and suicide risk among young people in Lesotho”.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To investigate the overall awareness of young people regarding the possible impact of social media on suicide risk;
2. To identify specific ways in which social media usage increases suicide risk among the youths in Lesotho;
3. To understand the role of social media in shaping behaviours related to suicide among the youths in Lesotho;
4. To identify potential areas for improvement and propose new intervention approaches to address social media's negative impacts on mental health.

1.4 Research questions

The main question that forms the basis of this research is “What are the perceptions of young individuals regarding the relationship between social media usage and suicide risk?”. The other sub-questions are:

1. What knowledge do young individuals have about how social media may influence mental health outcomes?
2. What are the specific online platforms that are associated with an increased suicide risk among youths?
3. How do different types of online interactions and engagement correlate with youth suicide risk?
4. What can be done to address the negative effects of social media on mental health in Lesotho?

1.5 Justification of the study

Primarily, the research is undertaken as a fulfilment to the requirements for a Master of Sociology degree. The study also seeks to uncover potential connections between online platforms and real-world mental health outcomes. Understanding how social media affects youth suicide risk could lead to better interventions, policies, and support systems to mitigate any negative impacts and promote positive online environments for young individuals. The study seeks to add to the existing statistics provided by BBC Africa (2024), which noted that most young people in Lesotho commit suicide due to unemployment, lack of attention from loved ones, death, alcohol and drug abuse and rape. The study is significant because of its potential to inform policymakers, mental health professionals and technology companies about the urgent need for proactive measures to address the negative consequences of social media usage on mental well-being. The study has the potential to change narratives about how the public views social media and suicide.

1.6 Scope of the study

In comparison with other African countries, Lesotho is a relatively small country with a population of about 2.3 million individuals (World Bank Group, 2021). Despite this size, Lesotho has the highest suicide rates in Africa and World Population Review reports put Lesotho in the top three countries with the highest suicide rates in the world (Laoye, 2023). Generally, suicide may be a result of various factors such as poverty, unemployment, and overall feelings of helplessness.

However, the study is meant to examine the role played by social media on suicide risk among young individuals. The study will exclusively focus on examining and discussing suicide risk among individuals aged between 15 and 35 years who have been and/or are active social media users in Roma town, specifically the National University of Lesotho campus. However, the study also relied on key informants who were older than 35 years. The study was geared towards the exploration of the link between social media content and suicidal ideation, analysing the impact of cyberbullying, and investigating the effectiveness of online mental health support in Lesotho.

1.7 Definition and measurement of terms

This section will focus on defining and measuring key terms in the study. The following is the conceptualisation of key terms and how they will be applied in the study.

1.7.1 Perceptions

Perception refers to insight or intuition, a way of viewing or explaining something (Mcdonald, 2012). Therefore, perceptions shall relate to the overall individual views and ideas about how social media increases suicide risk among young people in Lesotho. It includes thoughts and ideas about how social media puts young individuals at suicide risk.

1.7.2 Social media

Social media is defined as a collection of online tools that facilitate producing and selecting user-generated content (Davis, 2016). Social media in this study relates to online-based applications that let users communicate easily with other people. Social media applications featured in this study include Facebook, WhatsApp, X, TikTok and Instagram.

1.7.3 Young person

Different people define young people differently. The African Youth Charter (2006), for example, defines a young person as anyone between the ages of 15 and 35, but the United Nations defines a young person as anyone between the ages of 15 and 24. This definition may serve as the foundation for the concept. As a result, the Lesotho government has accepted the UN charter's concept of a young person.

1.7.4 Suicide ideation

Suicide ideation refers to the thoughts that people may have about killing themselves (Harmer et al., 2024). It is marked by a desire to kill oneself. For this study, suicide ideation relates to the thoughts that young people may have about killing themselves due to social media pressure.

1.8 Limitations of the study

The study is a master's mini-thesis, so it is a minimal study with a limited time frame. The study was planned to initially access a sample size of 25 participants, but due to time constraints and participants' schedules, the sample size was reduced. Some of the participants were totally against being tape-recorded, which meant that the

researcher had to spend more time writing what they were saying verbatim. This led to other participants losing interest in the study due to their tight schedules.

Another drawback was having to translate the consent form and interview guide from English into the local language of Sesotho, as well as the responses from Sesotho into English. Given that the participants themselves are not very literate, it is likely that certain complicated concepts were not well understood by them. I hired a qualified translator who is also a language teacher, although it's possible that some meanings were lost in translation.

1.9 Chapter outline

This thesis is organised into five chapters, and they are:

Chapter One: Introduction and Background of the Study

The chapter covers background, introduction, problem statement, study objectives, significance, research questions, overview and summary.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The chapter deepens the discussion of perceptions of a link between social media and suicide risk among young people in Lesotho and theories used in the study, which are Durkheim's theory of suicide and the social comparison theory by Leon Festinger. The themes covered by the literature review include contextualising social media, social media as a trigger for suicide, harmful social media content and suicide risk, existing research on social media and suicide risk in Africa, gaps in the literature and a conclusion.

Chapter Three: Methods of Research

The philosophical foundations, the research methodology and design, the study site, the population, sampling and sampling procedures, data collection techniques, data analysis, and ethical considerations are all covered in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Results presentation and discoveries

The presentation and discussion of the study's findings are the main features of this chapter.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The main conclusions of the study are outlined in this chapter, along with suggestions for interventions aimed at resolving the issues raised by social media use among young people in Lesotho. It also offers the study's conclusion.

1.10 Chapter summary

The chapter covered the introduction, background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, definition and measurement of terms, limitations of the study, and overview of the chapters in the study. The next chapter will look into both the empirical and theoretical literature to review the work done by other researchers and scholars on social media and suicide risk.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORIES

2.0 Introduction

The introduction chapter provided context for the study. This literature review chapter explores existing research on this topic, focusing specifically on the context of Lesotho, although the research will largely review literature from other countries because the topic has not fully been researched in Lesotho. The examination of the available literature helps to gain a deeper understanding of the role played by media outlets on suicide risk, especially among young people in Lesotho and identify potential areas for further research and intervention, as well as identify gaps in the literature. The objective of this literature review is to uncover the influence of online social media on the escalation of suicide risk among young people.

Social media usage is an important aspect of modern society, especially among young individuals. These platforms offer numerous benefits in terms of communication, socialisation, and information sharing. However, in recent years, there has been a vested interest on the impact of online media on mental health, particularly its role in the increase in suicide risk among young people.

The literature review will be structured as follows: The first section contextualises the use of social media and suicide. This is followed by a section that examines social media as a trigger for suicide. A follow-up section looks at the harmful content on social media. Then, a section on the research on media and suicide risk in Africa is provided, and lastly, there is a section on the gaps in the literature on media use and suicide risk. Last section covers the theories used in the study.

2.1. Empirical literature

Empirical literature reviews studies by other scholars to answer a particular research question (Zierau et al., 2020). This section is thereby focused on examining and reviewing existing studies related to the topic of suicide in different countries across the world.

2.1.1 Contextualising social media and suicide risk in the modern world

Online social is an essential component of individuals' lives, serving as a platform for communication, information dissemination, and social participation (Bilsen, 2018). The main functions of social networking sites, such Facebook and Myspace, are profile

updates and the ability to leave messages on friends' walls; publishing images or videos; leaving comments on their own or other people's photos or videos; get together to play games (Nielson, 2010). Nevertheless, there is a growing apprehension regarding the potential adverse effects of social media on individuals' psychological well-being. Research has indicated that suicide constitutes a public health concern encountered by many nations worldwide, prompting the World Health Organization (2022) to assert that reducing suicide mortality should be accorded priority within the public health domain. Consequently, the reduction of suicide mortality has been encompassed within the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations.

“The link between social media usage and suicide risk has been deemed complex and includes the potential to have both positive and negative results “(Guidry et al., 2020: 56). Several research studies indicate that social media has the potential to improve public knowledge about suicide and create greater awareness of suicide prevention programs (Luxton et al., 2011; Eggertson, 2015). The Internet and social media platforms have the potential to lower suicide rates by making mental health resources, support, and information more accessible (Moorhead et al., 2013). Studies indicate that social media and online networks allow people to quickly obtain knowledge, help, direction, and support (Robinson et al., 2016). According to Wright et al. (2014), Social media platforms can provide those who are at risk of suicide with perceived social support, as social support has been shown to improve mental, physical, and psychological well-being.

However, some researchers have discovered a link between the usage of social media and outcomes related to mental health. Several studies have looked into the possible drawbacks of excessive social media use, such as a rise in users' emotions of anxiety, sadness, and social isolation, particularly among teenagers and young adults (Primack et al., 2017; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). For those who are susceptible, the online environment can be difficult due to factors including cyberbullying, continual comparison with others, and pressure to live up to social media standards (Campbell, 2018). Research indicates that mental health disorders are the main contributors to suicide worldwide; that being said, other elements including loneliness, trauma, abuse, and conflict also play a role in this occurrence (Laoye, 2021).

2.1.2 Social media as a trigger for suicide

Some researchers argue that the impact of social media usage on depression in adolescents can be influenced by different factors. According to a study conducted by Frison and Eggermont (2016), social media use can be categorised as public (such as updating one's profile) or private (such as messaging), as well as active (interacting with others) or passive (browsing). According to the study, teenagers who use Facebook in public tend to be depressed. Active Facebook use was linked to beneficial outcomes like perceived social support, while passive use was linked to negative outcomes like depression among girls. The same researchers in (2017) found that while depressive symptoms predicted active usage of social media, passive social media use predicted depressive symptoms seven months later. This study tracked Flemish adolescents throughout time. Remarkably, Monir-major et al., (2016)'s study on healthy teenagers did not discover any link between depressed symptoms and Facebook use, including frequency, network size, self-presentation, and peer interaction.

A number of other academics have also examined the connection between social media use and mental health outcomes, including Balt et al., (2023). Excessive use of social media can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and anxiety, as found by Balt and his colleagues. Social media sites can also expose users to cyberbullying, unfavourable comparisons, and inflated standards, all of which have a detrimental impact on mental health (Zhu, 2021). Zalar et al. (2018) thereby asserted that about 90% of the people who commit suicide around the world have a mental health problem. Although cyberbullying remains a growing area of investigation, its prevalence among young individuals represents a grave public health issue closely intertwined with behavioural patterns, mental health, and developmental processes (Raskaukas & Huynh, 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2017). Akram (2018) asserts that in recent years, an increasing number of young individuals have fallen victim to digital bullying and harassment.

2.1.2.1 Cyberbullying

Reid and Weigle (2014) note that the prevalence of cyberbullying has increased recently, and the most popular ways that bullying occurs online are disseminating

offensive images or videos, making hateful websites or profiles, sending threatening messages, and spreading rumors. It's been argued that traditional bullying, which takes place in person, is very different from cyberbullying. People on social media platforms can disguise themselves by using pseudonyms or impersonating others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

Online bullying is considered a crime of opportunity since it typically occurs in secret and doesn't require direct communication with the victim (Englander & Muldowney, 2007). Thus, one of the main issues brought on by social media worldwide is cyberbullying. According to research, there is a direct correlation between being the victim of cyberbullying and having more suicidal thoughts and attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; van Geel et al., 2014). Online platforms' anonymity can exacerbate the harmful effects of bullying and make it more difficult for victims to leave ongoing harassment.

Research also found that cyberbullying is a result of other factors. For instance, a study that was conducted in Israel among adolescents aged 12 to 18 by Arrazy et al. (2021) uncovered a link between social media addiction and suicidal ideation, revealing that most of the young people who use social media are addicted, have sleep problems and extreme depression symptoms which are likely to force them into unnecessary acts such as cyberbullying. Most young people who harass others on social media are said to have problems of their own, and they, in turn, lack the means to use social media effectively. Young people in the study reported feelings of loneliness and psychological pressure, which are mostly a result of excessive use of social media and lack of control over how and when to use social media (Arrazy et al., 2021). This study among the youth in Israel, therefore, suggests that there is a relationship between social media and increased suicide risk among the youth.

Furthermore, other studies have documented that victimisation from Cyberbullying is linked to a higher likelihood of suicidal ideation, self-harm, and attempted suicide (Maurya, 2022). Furthermore, studies show that girls are more likely than boys to experience cyberbullying (Kim et al., 2019). According to the Royal Society for Public Health (2017), social media use in the US has been connected to higher than average rates of anxiety, depression, and sleep problems, with recent research revealing a 70% surge in depression and anxiety attributable to social media usage over the past

quarter-century. Other scholarly works have also posited that social media exhibits a greater addictive potential than substances such as alcohol and tobacco.

2.1.2.2 Social comparisons

Social media is associated with high percentages of people comparing themselves to others (Tadesse et al., 2019). Social media sites frequently encourage users to publish well edited versions of their life, which might not entirely reflect reality, which fosters a culture of comparison as per Tadesse's findings. The continuous exposure to flawless photographs, inappropriate lifestyles may result in low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, particularly in youth (Perloff, 2014). The difference between one's real existence and the idealized virtual self could foster a feeling of social isolation and aid in the emergence of mental health problems, such as thoughts of suicide (Carlson et al., 2019).

People usually view others' attractive images on social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram and are likely to be dissatisfied with their self-image (Carlson et al., 2019). These comparisons are likely to increase their negative emotions (Crowther & Ciesla, 2011). These comparisons will likely result in people having low self-esteem and self-criticism (Donnelly & Kuss, 2016). When people do not feel good about themselves, they are likely to exhibit unhealthy behaviours such as bullying to make up for the void that they feel. A study discovered that people on Instagram usually engage in appearance-based comparisons which seem to increase the drive towards thickness and the show of dissatisfaction towards one's body (Hendrickse et al., 2017).

People mainly compare themselves due to societal beauty standards available on social media platforms (Fardouly et al., 2018). Recently, a study in South Africa found that dark humour, a process of making jokes about negative occurrences such as death, injuries, failures, and other things, has become normalised on social media, leading to depressive episodes and suicidal ideation among young people (Shivambu, 2023).

The amount of information available to the public through social media is spread across various platforms (Shivambu, 2023). A study undertaken in the United States by Jashinsky et al. (2013) analysed suicide through X (formerly Twitter) due to its wide accessibility, large user base, and the fact that it serves as a platform for personal

expression. According to Jashinsky and his colleagues, tweeters publish status updates or tweets on Twitter, which are subsequently shared with their followers and the public. With over 200 million users and an estimated 500,000 new accounts created every day since its launch in 2006, Twitter has grown to be a vital part of our society (Jashinsky et al., 2013). These users consequently produce 400 million tweets every day. If suicide is handled properly, this abundance of data on people's daily activities and behaviors can be used to study suicide and possibly intervene. Tweets containing content indicating a risk of suicide can lead to actual suicidal behaviour, sometimes even resulting in fatalities (Markham, 2013).

According to research by Markham (2013), some people use social media for a variety of objectives. Markham notes that people utilize social media platforms these days for a variety of purposes, including help-seeking. Additionally, a lot of people feel more empowered and self-assured when asking for assistance online, as well as while obtaining information and having sensitive conversations (Gould et al., 2002). People mostly use the internet because they believe it to be a safer and more anonymous place to get assistance (Markham, 2013). Moreover, new research indicates that technology-based interventions, including informational or professional advice-accessing services, may be successful (Griffiths et al., 2010).

Research by Farrelly (2008) looking into Aboriginal suicide and self-harm on Facebook divided assistance requests into two categories: official and informal. Formal help-seeking entails requesting aid from experts with formal training, such as general practitioners, psychologists, counsellors, and the like. Conversely, informal help-seeking entails requesting aid from untrained sources such friends, family, neighbours, and social media. People use social media as a place to vent and share their deepest feelings when they're feeling overburdened (Farrelly, 2008).

Furthermore, a review of the research found that Facebook and other social media platforms enable users to submit "status updates" on a frequent basis, which allow their networks to be informed about their feelings (Carlson et al., 2019). According to Manago et al. (2012:369), "emotional disclosure" or "self-disclosure" is the main goal of Facebook's status update feature. According to Calancie et al. (2017), social media use may exacerbate emotions of worry and inadequacy. Calancie's study's findings showed that over half of the participants said social media made them feel less secure

and that they frequently compared their real-world lives to those of their virtual networks (Calancie et al., 2017). Additionally, the study discovered that following online conflicts, participants had relationship problems (Calancie et al., 2017). However, social media has the potential to provide social and emotional support and maintain relationships that would have otherwise faded away without this technology (Webb et al., 2022).

Other studies equate suicidality to genetics, stating that suicidality is genetically transferred through families. For instance, if in a family one person has committed suicide, chances are seen to be higher for people in that family to commit suicide too, as they are seen to have increased aggression and impulsiveness, which may force them into committing suicide too (Turecki et al., 2019). Turecki and associates further note that the expectation for perfection among people seems to be another factor that forces people to commit suicide as they may feel socially rejected and trapped.

On the other hand, some studies determined that social media increases suicide contagion. The concept of suicide contagion refers to the notion that exposure to suicide-related content, whether through direct communication or media representation, can influence others to engage in suicidal behaviours (Lake & Gould, 2014). Social media platforms have the potential to serve as channels for the rapid dissemination of suicide-related content, which may potentially amplify the contagion effect (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2020).

According to recent research, those who are vulnerable may be more likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide if they are exposed to suicide-related information on social media (Arendt et al, 2019). It affects suicide rates because individuals imitate suicidal behaviour in the media and ultimately take their own lives. According to a Pourmand et al., (2019) study conducted in the United States, following a celebrity suicide, the rate of suicide among the public increased only if the death caused a major uproar among social media users. On the other hand, suicide rates in the general population were not significantly impacted by suicides that did not receive a lot of attention on social media (Pourmand et al., 2019).

In addition, in a study analysing whether exposure to social media content influences suicide rates while analysing Instagram, Arendt et al. (2019) It should be noted that most participants (63.9%) who were able to recall and did not decline to disclose said

that they had been emotionally distressed by seeing self-harm content on Instagram. It's interesting to note that emotional disturbance did not correlate with suicidal thinking, planning for suicide, own self-harming behaviour, hopelessness, or suicide risk. Additionally, most individuals (59.6%) who were exposed to self-harm content on Instagram said they had considered how they may feel if they committed the same act against themselves (perspective-taking). These results provide credence to the theory that suicides are caused by exposure to suicide-related content on social media.

Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that suicide has a general impact on the younger population due to their inherent vulnerability to mental health issues, particularly during the adolescent years (Orbach, 2006). Young individuals are said to be confronted with crucial decisions regarding various aspects of their lives, such as education, living arrangements, social circles, and employment (Wilson et al., 2002). Moreover, Olaosebikan (2020) stated that young people must navigate the challenges associated with establishing their own identity, fostering self-esteem, attaining increasing independence and responsibility, cultivating intimate relationships, and addressing numerous other concerns. Concurrently, they are subjected to ongoing and fluctuating psychological and physiological processes (Olaosebikan, 2020). These circumstances elicit a certain level of helplessness, insecurity, stress, and a perception of diminished control (Patton et al., 2016).

Research has indicated that social media platforms contribute to a phenomenon known as the fear of missing out (Olaosebikan, 2020). This form of anxiety is triggered by the apprehension that others may be partaking in exciting and fulfilling experiences that one is excluded from (Alugo et al., 2020). Consequently, it engenders a persistent yearning to be present at social events, an incessant compulsion to check one's mobile device for the latest social media updates and trends, and an obsessive desire to maintain constant connectivity with the activities of others (Berla, 2018). Berla (2018) further posited that the fear of missing out frequently has detrimental effects on both mental and physical well-being, leading to feelings of inferiority, dissatisfaction with life, mood fluctuations, low self-esteem, loneliness, heightened negativity, and depression.

Additionally, social media platforms foster unhealthy mental health attitudes, including unhealthy comparisons, envy, imitation, and the presentation of fabricated

appearances (Graziosi, 2019). According to Alugo (2020), many individuals selectively portray only the most favourable aspects of their lives on social media, which can torment followers who aspire to emulate them. Consequently, this has facilitated the cultivation of inauthentic lifestyles solely for the sake of maintaining a social media presence (Alugo et al., 2020). Other studies posit that most people around the world commit suicide by hanging and women are more likely than men to commit suicide because of higher rates of depression (Gibb, 2005).

2.1.3 Harmful social media content and suicide risk

According to a Zhang et al. (2019) study done in China, there is a significant probability of suicide attempts due to social media pressure, and many users share content on social media platforms like Twitter and Sina Weibo that is related to suicide. These results highlight the need for actions to address a problem resulting from social media use across national boundaries. Some people appear to be adept at concealing their true intentions on social media, even though they occasionally post suicide-related content (Cheng et al., 2017; Du et al., 2018; Sawhney et al., 2018; Coppersmith et al., 2018; Vioules et al., 2018; Alambo et al., 2019). Alambo notes that “these individuals upload cryptic messages that may not immediately reveal their suicidal intentions”.

Brown (2018) conducted a study targeting Instagram as a social media platform. Brown analysed posts and pictures on Instagram and concluded that posts and pictures relating to deliberate self-harm can be found more often on Instagram, and this content seems to attract a lot of attention, putting the user’s profile into the league of the most popular profiles. Therefore, this may encourage suicidality. Carlyle (2018) also came to an agreement that people do share content relating to suicide on Instagram and people who usually do so show signs of depression and overall feelings of unhappiness. These findings, therefore, are worth noting when looking into whether social media poses the same threats in Lesotho.

Another study conducted on Instagram by Arendt (2019) showed that young people who are exposed to self-harm content on social media are more likely to commit suicide than those who are not exposed to harmful content. These findings show that Instagram content should be thoroughly analysed and appropriate measures put into place to protect those who may be harmed by the content shared on Instagram. Additionally, 32.5% indicated that they have performed the same (or very similar) self-

harming behaviour because of seeing self-harm content on Instagram, indicating a substantial number of participants reporting a (presumed) copycat influence (Arendt, 2019).

Additionally, a study focusing on social media and suicide in the world by Peled (2018) indicated that there is a substantial link between depression and suicidal ideation among young people, particularly those enrolled in college programs. This suggests that depression may influence a decision to take one's own life as a way to deal with a problem. Previous research backs up the claim made above that experiencing cyberbullying as an undergraduate student adds to the chance of developing depressive symptoms (Myers & Cowie, 2017). Additionally, Selkie et al. (2015) found that greater suicide rates were associated with 265 female college students who had either been bullied, victimized, or involved in cyberbullying. Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which social media use raises the risk of suicide in Lesotho, as the outcomes of this study were limited to cyberbullying, particularly in Lesotho.

In an article written by Jacob et al. (2017), teenagers reported that viewing photographs of self-harm posted by others on the internet was a significant factor in their engagement in self-harm behaviours. According to Jacob and his associates, young individuals explained that the visual stimuli of photos and videos triggered a physical response and motivated them to engage in self-harm rituals. Furthermore, a study examining self-harm images discovered a positive relationship between the severity of the depicted wounds and the number of responses they received (Brown et al., 2017).

Conversely, other research looked at extreme types of self-harming content on the internet. For example, a group of case studies by Rodway et al. (2016) examined the prevalence of self-harm disclosure on social media as a prelude to suicide death. According to the study's findings, 23% of the adolescent deaths in their sample had internet usage linked to suicide, including looking up suicidal techniques online, communicating suicidal ideas on social media, and participating in online bullying. Similarly, Poonai et al., (2017) found that young individuals in the modern era disclose their suicidal ideas on social media while investigating the effect of a highly publicized

suicide announcement made on social media on subsequent diagnoses of suicide-related cases in hospital emergency rooms.

Additionally, studies from other countries addressing the issue of social media on suicide risk have several factors in common. For instance, a study by Webb et al. (2022), which analysed the potential interplay between social media use and rates of deliberate self-harm among young people in Australia, noted that rising social media use among young people can be associated with increasing cyberbullying and self-harm, especially among young women. A study in India by Memon et al. (2018) also associated the increasing suicide rates in that country among youth with several factors, such as cyberbullying and depression among young people, agreeing that the increase in suicide rates among the youth in India can be associated with the simultaneous increase in social media use. It is of great importance to assess whether the same strategies can be used to find out whether social media increases suicide risk in Lesotho.

Kootbodien et al. (2020) found that suicide mortality and methods differ by age group and sex in South Africa, based on their analysis of trends in suicide in the country. According to the study, proper estimation of suicide fatality rates requires complete death registration data. The morbidity and mortality linked to suicide should be decreased by continuing efforts to deepen our understanding of the epidemiology of suicide. Thus, the study supports the claim that more research is necessary to determine the causes of suicidality in the African continent.

As noted by Zalar et al. (2018) given the fact that suicide represents a significant issue on a worldwide scale, it is important to acquire a more profound comprehension and advancement of effective techniques for prevention. The understanding of the most employed methods of suicide is of paramount importance in the implementation of preventive measures, as it diminishes the availability of lethal means for such self-destructive acts (World Health Organization, 2018). More research is necessary to gain a thorough grasp of this problem, as there hasn't been much done on the connection between social media use and suicide risk in Lesotho. Investigating the connection between social media use and suicide rates in Lesotho would provide important information for the creation of focused interventions and preventative measures.

2.1.4 Existing research on social media usage and suicide risk in Africa

Comparing research done in Western contexts, the association between youth social media use and suicide risk among African nations, particularly Lesotho, is comparatively weak. However, new research indicates that African teenagers may exhibit comparable patterns of problematic social media use and mental health problems (Kinyanda et al., 2012). Research from nations like South Africa, Uganda, and Nigeria has shown links between teenagers' psychological suffering and their overuse of social media. (Kirkbride et al., 2022). However, further research is needed to explore these associations in diverse cultural and socio-economic environment across Africa.

2.2 Theoretical literature

The previous literature review section discussed a wide range of studies on suicide and social media. Various studies have demonstrated that there are several reasons for individuals to resort to the act of suicide, and each instance of suicide possesses its unique historical background and justifications. Some causes of suicide can be attributed to financial hardships, personal difficulties, and a general sense of failure.

The study utilised two theories to understand the potential relationship between social media use and suicide risk, namely Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide and the social comparison theory by Leon Festinger. While the two theories approach the subject of suicide from different angles, the theories helped provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media and suicide risk.

Durkheim's theory aims to establish a link between social integration in society and suicide, while social comparison focuses on the tendency for people to evaluate their abilities, opinions, and behaviours by comparing them to others. Here, the social comparison theory becomes important in understanding the potential link between social media use and suicide risk because young people tend to compare themselves on social media, which leads to depressive episodes in the context of high unemployment rates and other socio-economic problems. Both theories highlight the importance of societal factors in shaping people's behaviours and outcomes. When used together, the theories provide valuable insights into how social factors can influence people's risk of engaging in suicidal behaviours.

This section has three subsections. The first subsection deals with Durkheim's explanation of suicide. The second subsection explains the social comparison theory. The last subsection, before the conclusion, is the criticisms of both theories.

2.2.1 Durkheim's theoretical explanations of suicide

Emile Durkheim is widely regarded as the first social scientist to undertake an empirical examination of suicide within the context of modern societies (Khan et al., 2021). Durkheim formulated his theory of suicide during a time of profound societal transformation in Europe, characterised by the transition from traditional to urban societies, to uncover the environmental circumstances that either foster or deter suicide (Brantez & Houle, 2019). Lukes (1992) claims that Durkheim investigated suicide in part because of Victor Hommay, a close friend at the Ecole, taking his own life. Durkheim's research on suicide provided a way to comprehend the reasons behind the widespread misery that European civilizations experienced (Lukes, 1992).

Durkheim's take on sociological theory mainly distinguished an individual and collective representation in society (Haynor, 2017). As noted by Haynor (2017), in his study of suicide, Durkheim attempted to show that whether one finds one's life meaningful is dependent on whether one is sufficiently attached to groups and whether one's life is sufficiently guided by normative constraints. Durkheim's principal contention regarding suicide asserts that modern capitalism yields boundless opportunities while also causing suffering and a decline in societal ethics due to the escalating values of modernity (Babbie, 2010). According to Ritzer (2011), Durkheim exerted considerable influence in shaping the structural-functional paradigm in the field of sociology, which explicates the dynamics of social structure. As such, Durkheim's (1897/1951) empirical study of suicide continues to form the foundation of sociological analysis of suicide and is considered the discipline's most important contribution to the area of suicidology (Joiner, 2005).

Durkheim developed social facts to counter the earlier conceptions by psychologists that the causes of suicide were genetic or that some individuals were proclivity towards suicide by nature (Lukes, 1992). He believed that societal structures (social facts) controlled people's thoughts, feelings, and actions. During his time, there was a considerable debate about suicide as a social phenomenon. Several statistical correlations and hypotheses have linked suicide to urbanisation, religion, occupation,

and the rate of social change, while other studies linked suicide rates to non-social factors such as heredity and climate race. There was also an unresolved debate on whether suicide was linked to mental disorders, although there was a general agreement that the rising suicide rates were caused by the change from traditional societies to the growth of industrialism (Lukes, 1992).

According to Babbie (2010), Durkheim introduced the concept of suicide by analysing existing suicide records, as he saw a pattern of suicide occurrences within modern capitalist societies. He employed the concept of suicide to account for variations in suicide rates, as his primary interest lay in comprehending why certain groups exhibit higher suicide rates compared to others (Ritzer, 2011).

Eskin (2013) states that Durkheim studied the impact of individualism and collectivism on suicidal behaviour. This refers to the relationship between an individual, society, and suicidal behaviour. Eskin notes that suicidality is frequently associated with individuality and collectivism in several ways. People who hold individualistic ideals may first feel that they are to blame for their unfortunate circumstances, which can exacerbate feelings of rage, sadness, and hopelessness. However, those who hold collectivistic beliefs might place the responsibility elsewhere or on external circumstances, lessening the effect that unfavourable feelings have on them. Second, attitudes about people who participate in non-fatal suicide behaviors for a variety of reasons might be influenced by individualism and collectivism in society. Suicide attempts are frequently perceived as pleas for assistance, and people who hold individualistic beliefs may blame and assign personal responsibility to the suicide victim. Also, being individualistic and holding strong collective values are likely to influence people to engage in suicidal behaviours as noted by Eskin (2013).

People with individualistic values see reasons for committing suicide as being within themselves while people with collective values or those who do things for the good of the entire society see everything as their responsibility or a calling to fulfil in the society (Kuhnen & Oyserman, 2002). For instance, Kaplan et al. (2006) stated that in Israel for example, suicide bombings occur mostly for political reasons and are carried out by men and women who believe they are doing something good for their movement.

Furthermore, Durkheim's conceptualisation of suicide is predicated on two fundamental principles: the structure of suicide rates within a given community is a

direct reflection of the structure of social relationships within that community, and social relationships vary in accordance with their level of integration and regulation (Mueller et al., 2021). According to Durkheim, integration denotes the degree of attachment that members of society possess, while regulation refers to the extent of external constraints imposed on individuals within society (Ritzer, 2011).

According to Durkheim, the two social currents are continuous variables, and when one of these currents is overly high or low, suicide rates rise. He explored various potential factors that impact suicide rates across different countries in Europe, including gender, age, politics, and religion (Moore, 2017). Durkheim discovered that these factors exerted a significant influence on suicide rates in diverse European nations (Bilsen, 2018). Thus, he posited that suicide rates are shaped by anomie, a state characterised by the absence of norms or social instability and disintegration within society.

2.2.2 Durkheim's four types of suicide

Durkheim concluded that suicide represents a tangible social issue that is deeply rooted in the degree of social integration (Lukes, 1992; Gerardi, 2020). The variations in suicide rates are dependent upon the level of societal integration. Recognising that suicide cannot be attributed to a single circumstance, Durkheim devised four distinct categories of suicide: "egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, fatalistic suicide, and anomic suicide" (Lukes, 1992; Khan et al., 2021). Durkheim posited that egoistic suicides are more likely to occur within societies or groups where individuals lack strong integration into the broader social collective (Berk, 2006). This lack of integration fosters a sense of detachment from society, while simultaneously indicating that society is detached from the individual (Ritzer, 2011). Conversely, altruistic suicide arises when social integration is excessively strong (Ritzer, 2011). In such cases, individuals commit suicide primarily for the greater good of society. Durkheim also identified fatalistic suicide as occurring when excessive regulation imposes restrictions on individuals' self-fulfillment within society (Gerardi, 2020).

Anomic suicides tend to arise when societal regulation is disrupted, particularly during periods of turmoil or significant political transformations (Ritzer, 2011). Disruption is likely to manifest during periods of drastic change, such as economic booms (Moore, 2017). According to this notion, individuals are more prone to committing suicide due

to the collapse of traditional societal norms. Such observations can cause feelings of depression and a loss of moral grounding for certain individuals, who may perceive suicide as the only viable solution. Consequently, this study was informed by these observations, specifically focusing on anomic suicide, to evaluate the potential influence of advancements and changes in social media on the rise in suicide rates, considering that social media is an indispensable factor in modern-day life across all societies. Fundamentally speaking, Durkheim argued that social facts, the societal circumstances and conditions that are external to the individual, such as language, norms, religion, morality, beliefs and laws, regulate and shape how the individual behaves as they are coercive (Bowring, 2016). Thus, for Durkheim, suicide is caused by social structures and not personal circumstances or proclivity towards suicide, as earlier psychologists had argued. Social media is now a social fact in the way it shapes how people feel, behave, and think.

2.2.3 Relating Durkheim's ideas to the study

Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide explores the social factors that influence individuals' likelihood of people taking their own lives. While Durkheim's work primarily focuses on suicide rates in a broader societal context, some of his key concepts can be related to the exploration of perceptions of a link between social media and suicide risk among young people.

2.2.3.1 Social integration (Social cohesion)

According to Durkheim, social integration—which he defined as the degree of an individual's relationship to society—plays a significant role in determining suicide rates (Ritzer, 2011). The study took into account how people's sense of belonging and social cohesion are affected by online interactions in the context of social media and suicide risk. The study assessed how social media platforms' isolation or cyberbullying may result in a lack of social integration and raise the possibility of suicide thoughts or actions in young people.

2.2.3.2 Anomie (Social normlessness)

The term "anomie", coined by Durkheim, describes a collapse in social standards in a community (Lukes, 1992). Investigating the connection between suicide risk and social media, the study examined whether the online environment contributes to the erosion of societal norms and values, potentially affecting the mental well-being of young

individuals. For instance, the constant comparison and pressure for validation on social media might create a sense of normlessness. At the core of comparison culture is individualism and accumulation under modern capitalism, which Durkheim critiques as part of structural problems causing anomie and destruction of societal bonds.

2.2.3.3 Social facts and external constraints:

Durkheim emphasised the importance of social facts, which are external influences on individuals' behaviour (Lukes, 1992). In the context of social media and suicide risk, external constraints could include societal expectations, peer pressures, and cyberbullying prevalent on the platforms. Examining how these external factors contribute to the perception of suicide risk among young people is essential.

2.2.3.4 Egoistic and altruistic suicide

Durkheim also distinguished between two categories of suicide: altruistic and egoistic. While altruistic suicide is linked to excessive social integration, egoistic suicide is associated with weak social integration (Ritzer, 2011). In the realm of social media, the research explored how the pursuit of social validation (egoistic) or exposure to harmful online communities (altruistic) may influence the perception and risk of suicide among young individuals.

2.2.3.5 Cultural and religious factors

Durkheim recognised the influence of cultural and religious factors on suicide rates (Lukes, 1992). In the exploration of social media and suicide risk, the study considered how cultural and religious beliefs shape attitudes towards online interactions. For instance, certain cultural norms may exacerbate or mitigate the impact of social media on mental health.

2.2.4 Social comparison theory

In addition to Durkheim's theory of suicide, Leon Festinger, a psychologist, first put forth the social comparison theory in 1954, which served as the study's guiding principle. As shown above, many social media users post content portraying romanticised lives. In the context of socio-economic inequalities, the prosperity of others as portrayed in romanticized images on social media, often puts other users under pressure, leading to depressive episodes for some of those who cannot live romanticised lives. At the core of Durkheim's argument is that capitalism brings about endless opportunities without any clear end goals or standards, and misery in that

when people fail to achieve goals, they become depressive. Similarly, Cherry (2022) highlights that social comparison theory states that individuals possess an inherent drive to evaluate themselves, often through comparisons with others. Hence, individuals form judgements about themselves by comparing their circumstances to those of others, particularly within their social circles. In alignment with this theory, the study aims to examine whether social media users are at risk for suicide due to comparing their lives with the content shared by their peers online. This strong inclination for comparisons aligns with Durkheim's argument that modernity engenders the distress of individualism and an incessant preoccupation with achievement (Steward, 2023).

2.2.5 Types of social comparisons

The study concentrated on two main types of social comparisons proposed by Festinger: “upward social comparison and downward social comparison. Upward social comparison appears to manifest when individuals self-evaluate themselves to those who possess superior qualities” (Niels, 2017). An illustration of this type of social comparison occurs when two acquaintances, who pursued the same academic discipline at university reconnect through social media after a considerable period since graduation. One friend has attained a prosperous occupation, possessed a residence, and possessed extravagant vehicles, while the other friend has yet to secure employment. Consequently, the latter individual, who lacks such luxuries, compares their current circumstances with their friend's. This comparison can elicit a fervent aspiration to enhance one's own life and capabilities, or it may induce distress and frustration in the individual.

On the contrary, Niels (2017) states that downward social comparison arises when individuals assess their circumstances about those who appear to be less fortunate. These downward comparisons provide individuals with a misguided sense of contentment and foster a belief in their superiority over their peers. However, these downward comparisons may yield tragic consequences when individuals become cognisant of the fact that others present a false identity online and are not inherently superior to them. Crusius et al. (2022) observed that individuals' inclination to engage in social comparisons is rooted in motivational considerations. In his original theory of social comparisons, Festinger (1954) emphasised individuals' intrinsic need to gain self-awareness. He posited that individuals possess an innate desire to maintain a

stable and accurate perception of themselves, thus prompting them to actively seek informative feedback regarding their attributes and competencies.

Festinger stated that individuals primarily rely on objective criteria for such evaluations. However, objective standards may not always be accessible or attainable for comparison. In such instances, individuals resort to social comparisons with others, particularly in the realm of social media. The perpetual need to compare oneself to others is a characteristic of human nature (Liu et al., 2017). At a broader level, humans exhibit a strong inclination to meticulously monitor their social standing as an integral facet of their quest for social status (Anderson et al., 2015). Humans consistently aspire to surpass others or outperform them in various aspects of life. Irrespective of the circumstance, one significant motivation for engaging in social comparisons appears to be the desire for accurate self-assessment, even though the pursuit of such insights about oneself can be riddled with biases. Social comparisons are usually presented as tactical actions carried out to achieve particular goals or purposes (Steers et al., 2014) .

According to Feinstein et al. (2013), studies looking into social comparison found that there is a correlation between social comparisons on social media and depression, according to Feinstein et al. (2013). Social media users frequently post optimistic images of themselves, which creates opportunities for social comparisons and makes people feel as though they must confirm their worth with material possessions, which increases their risk of depression (Steers et al., 2014), these comparisons may indicate a convergence of risks for depression and a crucial avenue for interventions. Additionally, other studies suggest that people with low self-esteem may face a heightened susceptibility to the adverse effects of social comparisons on their mental health (Cenat et al., 2014).

Nesi & Prinstein (2015) examined social comparisons made on social media and their relationship to depression in China. They discovered that even after adjusting for the effects of overall technology use, offline excessive reassurance-seeking, and prior depressive symptoms, technology-based social comparison and feedback-seeking were linked to depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). The strongest correlation was found in females and teenagers who were not very popular (based on peer reports).

In 2018, researchers discovered that using Qzone, a Chinese social media platform, was linked to depression through negative social comparisons. They also found that this link was stronger among individuals with low self-esteem (Niu et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there was no correlation between Qzone use and depression. In a similar study (Marengo et al., 2018) that mainly examined frequency of use discovered that higher use of highly visual social media (like Instagram) predicted internalizing symptoms and issues with body image in a sample of students. Furthermore, body image issues acted as a mediating factor in this study between the impact of highly visual social media and internalizing symptoms (Marengo et al, 2018).

2.2.6 Relating social comparison theory to suicide

Young people typically encounter organised content on social media platforms that presents what appear to be idealised lives, accomplishments, and appearances (Crusius, 2022). Regular exposure to this kind of material can promote feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, encourage upward social comparison, and even increase the risk of suicide. People frequently share only certain, well-organised parts of their lives on social media. The study investigated how these elements may produce an unattainable benchmark for comparison, thereby impacting young people's feelings of inadequacy and raising their risk of suicide by making them feel like they cannot live up to these imagined social standards.

2.2.7 Criticisms of the theories

Just like many other theories, the theories used in this study have had their fair share of criticisms. For instance, critics of Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide noted that Durkheim places too much emphasis on social factors, neglecting other aspects of human life such as psychological well-being and biological factors that may ultimately put people at risk for suicide (Abrutyn et al., 2021). Also, by focusing on integration and regulation, critics note that Durkheim overlooked other factors that may result in suicidal behaviour and he ignored the link between societal forces and individual forces (Ritzer, 2011). Durkheim has also been attacked for being too simplistic in his explanations of suicide. Critics argue that real life is more complicated than what Durkheim made it out to be. Real-life suicidality is a result of several factors at play.

On the other hand, social comparison theory critics argue that social comparison theory does not fully explain differences in how people engage in social comparisons.

It assumes that all people engage in comparisons the same way without considering factors such as self-esteem, or cultural factors (Crusius, 2022). Critics further argue that the theory does not fully address the negative consequences of upward comparisons which can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction, envy, and low self-esteem.

2.2.8 Conclusion

The two theories present sufficient theoretical grounds for comprehending the potential role of online social media in the escalation of suicide rates in Lesotho. Conducting empirical research guided by these theories has facilitated a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between online social media and suicide rates. While online social media has undeniably changed communication and connectivity, its impact on the mental health of the youth cannot be ignored. This literature review highlights the existing evidence linking social media use to an increase in suicide risk among young individuals. The multidimensional relationship involves aspects such as cyberbullying, suicide contagion, and the culture of social comparison. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics and inform the development of comprehensive strategies to promote a healthier online environment for youth (Robinson et al., 2016).

Treating and preventing youth suicide requires a deeper knowledge of effects that social media has on the lives of adolescents and young people. Social media use can cause activities that improve mental health, like sleep, to be substituted, even if it may not have a direct influence on general wellbeing. It may also expose people to more damaging digital encounters, such as cyberbullying, which can alter their mood and mental health.

2.3 Gaps in the literature

While research specifically focusing on suicide in Lesotho is limited, studies conducted in other nations offer insights into the issue. Studies focusing on suicide in Lesotho acknowledge other reasons why people commit suicide. For instance, Simelane (2023) reported that a study conducted by Alex Muller in 2023 demonstrated a heightened suicide rate among non-gender-conforming individuals in Lesotho. It has been documented that, one in three transgender women (33%) in Lesotho, one in six transgender men (16%), and three in five gender non-conforming individuals (60%) have made suicide attempts mainly because of depression coming from lack of

acceptance (Simelane, 2023). It is crucial to acknowledge that suicide rates are influenced by several factors, including social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, social media can potentially exacerbate these factors.

Furthermore, in an interview for BBC radio (2023), a psychotherapist in the Ministry of Health Lesotho Ts'episo Siseoana mentioned factors such as the high unemployment rate and the government's inability to create jobs for young people as one of the major factors that increase suicide risk in the country. He went further to note that other young people admit to attempting suicide due to their parents' unavailability and the pressure they put on their children to succeed academically. This psychotherapist notes that the family structure in Lesotho has changed drastically, therefore, putting additional pressure on young people to succeed. Although Siseoana painted a picture of why suicide rates are high in Lesotho, his findings still leave a question unanswered "Does exposure to social media increase suicide rates among young people?". As the world advances, so does technology. Therefore, it is important to find out how different parts of the society shape that society. In line with what Simelane says about suicide, several studies have connected social inequalities to suicide. In low- and middle-income nations, suicide rates have been linked to poverty, unemployment, debt, and low levels of education (Knipe et al., 2015).

Highly educated people, however, appear to be at a higher risk of suicide, according to a study by Kootbodien et al. (2020). This is comparable to an Italian study (Pompili et al., 2013) that revealed higher educational attainment was associated with an increased risk of suicide. In comparison to widowed or divorced people, married people also have a higher suicide risk. Interpersonal connection issues, like marital issues, family disputes, and domestic abuse, could be important (De Vries et al., 2011). In South Africa, adult suicide rates exhibit seasonal variation, with summer seeing the highest rates and winter seeing the lowest. This was noted by Kootbodien and his colleagues.

Research particularly examining the relationship between social media usage online and the risk of suicide in Lesotho is scarce. Studies that have already been done in other nations are more generic and have not been adapted to the sociocultural and economic circumstances of those nations. Moreover, the impact of cultural characteristics unique to Lesotho on the correlation between online social media use

and suicide rates is not well explored in the literature. Social conventions, customs, and cultural subtleties can all have a big impact on how people view and interact with social media (Robinson et al., 2016). There doesn't appear to be much comprehensive data on the frequency and type of social media use in Lesotho. Understanding which platforms are most popular, how individuals engage with them, and the extent of their influence is crucial for a comprehensive analysis.

Furthermore, there is a lack of attention paid to Lesotho-specific risk factors linked to social media and suicide: community dynamics, economic difficulties, and concentrated stresses can all have a big impact on how social media affects mental health. Additionally, there is a dearth of research on the efficacy of possible and current suicide treatments and prevention techniques in the context of Lesotho. Customized strategies are necessary to handle the particular problems that the population faces. Qualitative research examining people's lived experiences and perspectives in Lesotho about social media and its possible effects on mental health is similarly lacking. Qualitative research offers significant insights into the population's subjective experiences.

Long-term studies tracking changes in social media use and suicide rates over time are also essential (Shawhney et al., 2021). A lack of longitudinal data may limit the understanding of trends and the establishment of causal relationships (Macrynika et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers interested in addressing these gaps could contribute significantly to the literature and help inform targeted interventions and policies specific to Lesotho's context. Chapter 3 (27) of Lesotho's constitution refers to the country's adoption of measures meant to guarantee its residents the best possible level of physical and mental health. This comprises laws aimed at establishing circumstances that guarantee access to all medical care and services in the event of illness and enhance public health. Much of these ideals in the constitution have not been fully utilised as the country continues without a suicide response strategy even though the suicide mortality rates have increased.

2.4 Chapter summary

While online social media has undeniably changed communication and connectivity, its impact on the mental health of the youth cannot be ignored. This literature review highlights the existing evidence linking social media use to an increase in suicide rates

among young individuals. The multidimensional relationship involves aspects such as cyberbullying, suicide contagion, and the culture of social comparison. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics and inform the development of comprehensive strategies to promote a healthier online environment for the youth (Robinson et al., 2016). Gaining a deeper understanding of how social media affects the lives of adolescents and young adults, both positively and negatively, is important for both treating and preventing youth suicide. While social media use may not directly impact overall well-being, it can lead to the displacement of activities that positively affect mental health, such as sleep. Additionally, it increases the likelihood of being exposed to negative online encounters like cyberbullying, which can lead to mood and mental health swings.

Suicide is an intricate and multifaceted issue. Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that the utilisation of social media can affect the development of thoughts of self-harm, especially among vulnerable adolescents (Memon, 2018; Farok & Mahmud, 2020). This influence is further compounded by the potential for negative messages and cyberbullying on social networking platforms, which can normalise self-inflicted harm and discourage seeking professional assistance (Daine, 2013). Moreover, the frequency of social media and smartphone usage has also been linked to thoughts and behaviours related to suicide (Macrynika et al., 2021). Nevertheless, further investigation is required to determine the link between social media and suicide risk in Lesotho, particularly within the context of the country's unique cultural and social factors. The next chapter will examine the methods used to collect and analyse data in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

The theoretical framework was covered in detail in the preceding chapter. To lay the groundwork for the upcoming chapter, which presents the findings and analysis, this chapter describes the research design and methods for this study. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate views regarding a possible connection between youth suicide risk and online social media use in Lesotho, namely in Roma town, Maseru. The use of a qualitative technique was made possible by the sensitive nature of suicide and the fact that qualitative research may be utilized to explore and comprehend the meanings that people or groups assign to social or human problems (Delpont & Fouche, 2011; Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the qualitative research helped me to understand people's opinions and views better regarding the subject of suicide.

Methods used to collect the data include face-to-face in-depth interviews with young people in Roma, especially students at NUL. Other participants included key informants such as lecturers at the NUL who teach mental health-related subjects, police officers who have dealt with suicide cases, government hospital employees who deal with suicide cases, as well as residents of the Roma area. I also did social media app tours on Facebook, TikTok and Instagram. Social media app tours are guided tours or demonstrations conducted on social media platforms to showcase the features, or user experience of a particular social media app (Shivambu, 2023). The participants interviewed in this study offered a more comprehensive understanding of the subject of suicide as they comprise young people themselves or experts who serve young individuals daily.

The chapter will commence by looking into the philosophical underpinnings of the study, followed by a discussion on the research approach used in the study. Then in the following sections, the researcher provides an overview of the documentary study and literature review. The researcher goes further to discuss access to study sites and sampling procedures. It is also imperative to discuss in-depth interviews, content analysis, data analysis, reliability and validity of the findings, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Philosophical underpinnings

Philosophical underpinnings are commonly known as philosophical assumptions. Gemma (2018) defines philosophical underpinnings as “the truth, reality, and knowledge that the researcher perceives”. They are the framework used to guide the understanding of the research paradigm and theoretical orientation and how they influence the research methodology. They are crucial in research as they direct the research goals and outcomes. They are rooted in the school of thought that the researcher affiliates with previous research experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1.1 Constructivist ontology

Merriam and Tisdell define ontology as “what one believes about the nature of reality”. Therefore, social reality can be understood from the external point of view as it is socially constructed and changes (Maree & Westhuizen, 2011). The meanings and experiences are subjective, and they are experienced through constant interactions with others in the same society based on historical and cultural norms within the environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Constructivist Ontology is adopted in this study to explore perceptions of a potential link between social media usage and suicide risk among young individuals in Lesotho. In the context of this study, adopting a constructivist ontology allows me to understand the lived experiences of social media users as dynamic and contextually situated. Social media users’ experiences are not fixed; they are constantly changing and shaped by technology, social environments, and cultural influences. Social media users experience several psychological needs and challenges that are influenced by a few structural factors, thus manifesting in negative experiences such as depression, stigma and discrimination, and mental health crises that put their lives at risk for suicide. Amidst all the negativity that users face, social media continues to thrive and come in various forms, bringing new challenges for the users.

The study sought to explore how young individuals in Lesotho construct meaning and make sense of their engagement with social media platforms about mental health and suicide risk. As a social researcher, I know that several factors, including cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and social contexts, shape participants’ experiences. I approached the study with an open mind, taking note of the complexities and

diversities within the Basotho community. By engaging in active reading and listening, I aimed to uncover meanings and narratives arising from participants.

3.1.2 Interpretivist epistemology

Epistemology is said to be concerned with the nature of knowledge and how any one social actor knows that they know something (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is thereby concerned with what is regarded as acceptable knowledge by the researcher (Igwenagu, 2016).

Further defining epistemology as the process by which a researcher seeks to acquire knowledge to arrive at reality, are Alharahsheh and Pius (2020). Conversely, positivism formed the basis for the development of interpretivism. It is focused on intricate context-related variables and elements. As they go further into meaning, it acknowledges that people are distinct from physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Rather than trying to establish universal norms that may be applied generally, interpretivism seeks to include richness in the insights (Myers, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012; Bhattacharjee, 2012). Thus, knowledge creation from social construction and interpretation by social actors are central to interpretivist epistemology. It all comes down to the information that is created during the study process between the participants and the researcher.

In this study, I adopted an interpretivist approach to explore the different ways in which participants interpret and make sense of their experiences with social media in relation to mental health. From an interpretivist perspective, I do recognise that individuals' understandings of social phenomena are shaped by their unique perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts. Therefore, rather than seeking to uncover universal truths or objective realities, I aim to explore the meanings and interpretations that participants attribute to their interactions with social media platforms.

3.2 Research approach

The research methodology used in the study was qualitative. Qualitative research, according to Goundar (2012), is the in-depth examination of social and cultural phenomena. It is also a way to investigate and comprehend, from a broader perspective, the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human situation (Delpont & Fouche, 2011; Creswell, 2014). The main strength of a qualitative

research approach, as noted by Dawson (2002), is that it allows for collecting rich and detailed data using methods such as in-depth and open-ended interviews, observations, life histories and focus groups to explore attitudes, behaviours, and experiences.

Because it is carried out in a natural environment, qualitative design is also more convenient. The flexibility and adaptability of qualitative research design is further demonstrated by the researcher's ability to modify data collection techniques to obtain sufficient data. A qualitative research design yields more detailed and in-depth data, which contributes to a more thorough knowledge of the research problem. In-depth interviews are one technique used in qualitative research to collect rich, detailed data (Andersen & Taylor, 2011). This kind of research aims to obtain in-depth feedback from participants in order to enable the researcher to delve further into their thoughts and emotions. The use of a qualitative research design was justified by the belief that it would yield a deeper comprehension of the research problem.

3.3 Documentary study and literature review

The study made use of documents and a literature review to gather data about the subject of suicide. A documentary study involves examining the documents that are out there and providing useful information to complete the picture of a particular story or phenomenon under study. Here, researchers often study documents such as letters, meeting minutes, companies' constitutions or policies, settlement agreements and other relevant documents (Xaba, 2018: 192). Documents relate to all types of written communications that may shed light on the phenomenon that is being investigated (Nieuwenhuis, 2011). In this study, I examined local newspapers such as The Reporter, Public Eye, Lesotho News Agency, and The Informative, which provided relevant news on suicide, including reports on Lesotho's mental health crisis. Despite accessing this information entirely online, its reliability and validity remained intact.

A literature review provides an overview of scholarship regarding a research topic (Nieuwenhuis, 2011). It provides past and current scholarly research on the topic. In terms of this study, a literature review was used to assess past and current scholarly research on suicide in the world. Creswell (2002: 85) states that "a good literature review is representative of sources on the phenomenon being studied and provides a

justification for the study by reflecting on how the research will expand past research, fill a gap in research, or explore the views of an underrepresented group”.

3.4 Study population

In research, the population refers to all participants who are eligible for the study based on selection criteria (Given, 2008). The study was conducted around the Roma area, which is said to have a population of around 15,000. The population of this study comprised young individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 who reside around the Roma area and who were or have been active social media users.

3.5 Access to sites and sampling

The study was conducted around the Roma area within the Manonyane community in the rural part of Maseru district Lesotho. The university site, hosting over 8000 members, is in Roma, approximately 34 kilometers southeast of Maseru.

The broad Roma valley is characterised by rugged terrain, consisting of 16 villages and it is located between two plateaus such that it assumes the shape of a valley. Roma Valley is home to the National University of Lesotho, which is the biggest and oldest university in Lesotho, housing most of Lesotho’s youth population and providing the backdrop for investigating suicide dynamics among the youth as research shows that suicide is high among young individuals in Lesotho. Roma is, therefore, a perfect location for the study as young people can be easily accessed.

The researcher also analysed content on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and Twitter as the commonly used social media platforms in Lesotho. Accessing the study site was not difficult because the researcher already knew a few students who reside in Roma. Besides that, the supervisor also advised and offered a helping hand to diversify the research. The researcher also contacted a few of her former lecturers who research and teach mental health-related subjects and were more than eager to talk to her about the subject at hand.

The research employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select participants who have experienced or been affected by suicide, as well as individuals who are active social media users in Roma Lesotho. Other participants in the study referred their friends and acquaintances to the researcher.

Purposive sampling, according to Campbell et al., (2020), is a research strategy that best fits the research's aims and objectives with the sample, boosting the study's rigor and the accuracy of the data and conclusions. When a researcher decides to employ the purposive sampling method, he/she would simply directly go to those potential participants with the information that he/she needs. In this case, the researcher was interested in talking to young people who use social media and any experts with sufficient information on suicide. Snowball sampling, on the other hand, is a method in which a participant gives the researcher the name or contact of another potential participant (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). For instance, one of the participants, Julia, pleaded with the researcher to interview her friend who was undergoing treatment for depression due to social media content. It was quite helpful for the researcher to meet someone with first-hand experience.

The researcher chose the volunteers based on factors like age and experience that were pertinent to the study, thanks to the methodology. Groups were created within the population according to age, gender, and place of residence. The selection of participants was based on their desire to engage, availability, and variety of social media usage and suicide risk situations. The age range of the participants was 18 to 35. The available resources, the availability of participants, and data saturation—the point at which the researcher believes she has gathered enough information on the study—were the only factors that determined the sample size for this investigation. In the end, the researcher conducted interviews with twenty individuals from various backgrounds.

Initially, the population for this study was primarily meant to be young individuals, specifically those who actively use social media. However, to diversify the sample, the researcher had to collect data from older people living around Roma who have information about suicide. These were residents of Roma who had experience in contacting police officers when they came across suicide-related cases. It is important to emphasise that the study pursued different types of young people who are social media users between 18 and 35 years of age. The target population was easily accessible as the researcher was speaking to people on campus, next to the campus and in social media groups.

Research Site: Roma Town, Maseru Lesotho



3.6 Data collection methods

Data collection is said to be gathering information from the sample so that the research questions are answered (Bryman, 2012). Data relates to pieces of information found in a setting and it is aligned with the interest and perspective of the research question. According to Merriam and Tisdall (2016), the theoretical perspective, the research topic, the study's goal, and the sample selection all influence the most appropriate data gathering technique. Data for this study was gathered through social media app tours and semi-structured in-person interviews.

3.6.1 In-depth interviews

The researcher spent a long time in Roma collecting data through face-to-face in-depth interviews and social media app tours. An in-depth interview as noted by Xaba (2018) relates to “a qualitative research method intended to uncover detailed information with a small number of participants”. It is conversational and involves the researcher probing some statements that a participant will make to have a clear view of the phenomenon under study (Xaba, 2018). Broadly speaking, after conducting in-

depth interviews, a researcher ought to have a strong explanatory power about a particular story of a phenomenon.

Roma is a small town in the outskirts of Maseru district under the Manonyane community council and it is home to the National University of Lesotho and several villages including Ha-seqoma, where the researcher was born and raised although she now resides at Ha-thetsane, Maseru. As an active social media user and student at the National University of Lesotho, earlier in 2023 the researcher started noticing a trend of young individuals who left lengthy suicide notes on social media and her interest was instantly piqued.

She became obsessed with the idea of finding out why so many young people were committing suicide. Therefore, she started to investigate. However, the formal data collection process started in March 2024 and ended in April 2024. Importantly, the researcher already had prior knowledge about the dynamics around suicide and social media before the formal data collection. She started her interviews in Roma, next to the NUL, where she spoke to some students some of whom are students of the NUL and then went on to access more participants in the villages closer to the campus. The interviews were particularly useful in uncovering stories behind participants' experiences with cyberbullying and pursuing in-depth information about the topic.

The researcher meticulously took notes during the interviews while the tape recorder was running. She also made it a point to follow up with inquiries. The interviews were less formal and more engaging because of the constant probing. As a result, the interviews had a lot of babbling about unrelated subjects and resembled talks with long-lost friends and acquaintances. The semi-structured interview guide allowed for a lot of rambling, and it made it more interesting to talk about other topics. The rambling was helpful because it revealed other details that may have been overlooked had the researcher not allowed rambling.

Before starting the interviews, the researcher clearly explained and requested consent from all the participants. She made sure that every participant understood and signed the consent form before the interview commenced. Most of the participants were literate, so they could read the questions and consent form without issues. However, the researcher made it her mission to translate the questions and consent form to Sesotho for some of the participants who could not understand English clearly.

3.6.2 Content analysis: Social media app tours

Most people rely heavily on social media in their daily lives. Studying social media requires a thorough analysis of social media content. Therefore, to understand aspects of suicide such as withdrawals from social interactions or feelings of isolation, the researcher used key terms, such as "alone," "isolated," "no one understands me," or "pushing everyone away" to search for content that could suggest that there was a possibility that a user was at risk of suicide. She could not search for the word "suicide" because apps like Facebook have security aspects that detect the word suicide and automatically refer the searcher to helplines.

The researcher thereby collected data by going through social media applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and TikTok, where she further investigated phrases indicating potential risk factors or triggers for suicide, such as "recent loss," "relationship problems," "financial difficulties," "substance abuse," or "bullying," "I had to do it" and "I am sorry". These phrases were particularly useful in uncovering different stories indicating that a user is experiencing some form of mental breakdown.

3.7 Data analysis

According to Bryman (2012), data analysis is concerned with managing data by checking out obvious flaws. It is used to break down large bodies of information collected into more manageable chunks. The researcher began her data analysis process by first transferring the field data to a clean sheet of paper and transcribing audio recordings from the field. She also had to transcribe the written field notes and translate those that were in Sesotho to English. She further took time to go through her data in detail looking for similar themes and coding the data into those themes.

To find recurrent themes, patterns, and meanings in the information gathered from interviews and social media content, thematic analysis was employed. Thematic analysis is a technique for finding, evaluating, and summarizing patterns or themes in data, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Using this method, the researcher was able to pinpoint important elements and processes that social media may use to raise the risk of suicide.

In qualitative research, the purpose of theme analysis is to classify meaning patterns in a dataset that address the research question (Nowell et al., 2017). The ability to

apply theme analysis within various frameworks to address a wide range of research topics is one of its advantages (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). Thematic analysis includes transcribing the raw data to make it more manageable and for it to make sense to the researcher. Verbatim transcription was used in this study. The transcribed data was then coded and broken down into smaller components labelled in terms of the frequency of their occurrence while also establishing any relationship between them. Data must be coded and interpreted to gain a better understanding, thus providing relevant answers to research questions, the literature as well as the theoretical framework (Bryman, 2012).

3.8 Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are ways to show and communicate the research procedures' importance and the research findings' truthfulness. Reliability is influenced by a number of elements, including the investigators' capacity to collect and document material effectively and the repeatability, consistency, and stability of the informant's accounts (Seltiz et al., 1976; Creswell, 2014; Nicholas, 2021). Conversely, validity has to do with how accurate or truthful the results are (Nicholas, 2021). In qualitative research, four methods are used to test for reliability and validity: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

3.8.1 Dependability

Also known as consistency, dependability describes the research process in a detailed manner such that the process can be repeated (Janis, 2022). It consists of consistent data-gathering procedures. To make sure the procedure was thorough, the supervisor and peers examined the research findings and the data collection techniques (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). The researcher also recorded every step of the research process, from the methods used to the findings, without withholding any information.

3.8.2 Credibility

According to Johnson et al. (2020), credibility is demonstrated by the researcher's ability to show that the findings fairly reflect the subject of the study rather than the researcher's opinions. To ensure reliable findings, the researcher used her journal to self-reflect and controlled her biases and partialities by acknowledging their existence and consequences (O'Leary, 2017). Self-reflection helped the research gain credibility and made it clear to the readers how the conclusions were drawn from the data. The

researcher showed a dedication to openness and precision by participating in this self-reflection process (Meena et al., 2020).

3.8.3 Transferability

For readers and other researchers to assess if the findings are applicable in different contexts, the researcher provides comprehensive information (Johnson et al., 2020). Johnson and colleagues also point out that while the research's findings might not apply to every population, they might be applicable to other groups with comparable traits. To enable readers to determine whether the findings are applicable to different contexts, the researcher supplied comprehensive details regarding the research context and participants.

3.8.4 Confirmability

The author reassures the reader that the information received from participants, not the researcher's interpretations, is the basis and reflection of the results (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). Confirmability was attained by the researcher by thoroughly outlining the research procedures. She explained how the results connect to the original data and the thoroughly defined procedures for gathering and analysing the data (O'Leary, 2017).

3.9 Challenges encountered when conducting the study

The biggest challenge that the researcher had to deal with was accessing participants. Some participants would set appointments with her but failed to attend those meetings. This meant that the data collection process had to be prolonged, as in some cases, she had to set up new appointments or find new participants for the study. Also, some participants were not comfortable with being tape-recorded, which meant that she had to take a long time writing what they said verbatim, prolonging the interview process and taking more of their time.

3.10 Ethical considerations

Research on suicide is bound to be sensitive, and the researcher is fully aware of the sensitivity around suicide. Thereby, the issue of ethics largely applies while dealing with issues of suicide. Given (2008) denotes that ethics include issues relating to values, mannerisms, and morality that are socially acceptable and preferred. These may include issues such as how a researcher treats participants, the choice of words and activities that can be engaged and those that need to be dropped in research

(Bryman, 2012). Ethics influence who and how the research process is to be carried out. It is about how well the researcher upholds the integrity and truthfulness of the research process. This study was approved at the NUL to partially fulfil the Master of Sociology degree under the Sociology and Social Work Department.

3.10.1 Informed consent

Researchers educate participants about the potential dangers, advantages, and available options before implementing a particular procedure or intervention, a process known as informed consent (Shah et al., 2023). Before participants in social research can participate, they must be told about the study's potential dangers and benefits. This ensures informed consent. Before starting participant interviews, the researcher obtained both written and verbal informed consent. Before being involved in the study, participants gave their informed consent, guaranteeing that their rights would be upheld and that their participation was voluntary. Potential participants were provided with consent forms by the researcher to guarantee their voluntary participation in the study. The researcher's and her supervisor's information was contained in the consent forms. They were signed by her as well. The Informed consent form contained sufficient information about the study so that participants could make informed decisions about taking part in the research. The Informed consent form contained sufficient information about the study so that participants could make informed decisions about taking part in the research.

Given (2008) posits that there exists a tight relationship between participants' right to liberty and justice and informed consent. Without being forced to participate in the study, participants are free to agree or disagree. It is also the duty of the researcher to explain to participants the advantages and disadvantages of taking part in the study. To make sure that participants fully understood the purpose of the study, they were provided with a thorough explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing Sesotho and English as the official languages of Lesotho.

3.10.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality are based on an idea that participants have a right to privacy which is a fundamental human right valued by many, hence a need to respect personal privacy irrespective of who people are (Bryman, 2012). Participants' interests and well-being should be protected in social research (Babbie et al., 2011).

Assuming anonymity and confidentiality in this study, the real names and locations of participants are not disclosed. The researcher used pseudonyms to describe and talk about participants, even for posts taken on social media, where she did social media app tours (going through social media content) on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok to look for posts of people who have been at risk of suicide due to social media. The researcher also created targeted posts that highlighted the purpose of the study such as “Is social media still healthy though?”. The researcher encouraged young individuals, as well as family members of those who have been at risk of suicide, to participate in the study privately using anonymous accounts. She fully understands that suicide is a sensitive matter, so she made sure that she protected her participants’ details and confidentiality. Therefore, interviews were conducted in private spaces per the participants’ arrangements.

3.10.3 Invasion of privacy

The researcher did not ask personalised questions or invasive questions. When people agreed to participate in the study, they were at liberty to decline to answer some of the questions that may arise during the interview process if they felt like the matter was too personal. The researcher was careful not to ask participants too personal questions as to avoid invading their privacy during the interviews.

3.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the philosophical underpinnings, research design, data collection and analysis methods employed by this study. The research sought to understand the perceptions of young individuals in relation to the potential link between social media and suicide risk in Lesotho. How the youths interact with one another on social media platforms was discussed through in-depth interviews, documentary study and social media content analysis. Participation was purely voluntary, and all participants enjoyed the interviews as the interview process was done in relaxed private spaces where they could just be themselves. The researcher permitted participants to deviate from the script while still making sure that all her questions were addressed; she did not attempt to strictly and blindly follow the interview questionnaire. All the participants were honest and saw the interviews as a chance to be heard and understood, rather than feeling as though they were trying to

hide something. To help readers better understand how conclusions were reached, the research findings are clearly analysed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

The procedures for gathering and analysing data were covered in the methodology chapter. The research on young people's beliefs of a connection between social media use and suicide risk in Lesotho is presented in this chapter. Social media has influenced many facets of human existence, such as interpersonal relationships, which has led to worries about possible effects on mental health and wellbeing. Through this study, the researcher discovered that although social media platforms provide never-before-seen chances for connection, communication, and information sharing, they also pose special risks and challenges, such as the potential for exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, and social pressures to compare oneself with others, all of which raise the risk of suicide. Social media is therefore like a two-edged sword. It may have largely favourable effects for some people, but negative consequences for others.

The presented data were collected from two diverse samples: young people between the ages of 18 and 35 who were or have been social media users and social media content analysis. The researcher used purposive and snowball sampling while collecting the data because they allowed for collecting information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings were derived using thematic analysis, which revealed several themes. The main theme that arose was that social media has become a social fact in the Durkheimian sense. The study also describes the social media usage patterns among young people, where the researcher uncovered that all the participants used one or more social media platforms daily. There are also sections on social media benefits, social media risks, perceived suicide risk factors, perceptions of a link between social media and suicide, and perceptions of intervention strategies. The above-mentioned themes will be discussed in detail below.

The chapter is structured as follows: The researcher starts by dwelling on the demographic characteristics of participants. Subsequently, there is a section addressing the youths' perceptions of social media and suicide risk. Then, she briefly discusses her findings in relation to the objectives and research questions before concluding.

4.1 Demographic characteristics of participants

It is crucial to provide the background of participants to understand better the study and the information provided by them. Table 4.1a provides an overview of the 17 participants' details, such as age, gender, geographic location, educational level, and social media usage patterns.

Table 4.1a: Summary of demographic information of participants

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Geographic Place of Interview	Level of Education	Social media usage
Dominic	26	Male	Hata-Butle, Roma	Diploma	Uses social media a lot
Mariam	23	Female	NUL Roma Campus	Working towards a degree	Uses social media a lot
Julia	28	Female	Mafikeng, Roma	Degree	Does not use social media often
Sindy	31	Female	Mafikeng, Roma	Degree	Does not use social media often
Lereko	33	Male	St. Joseph Roma	Diploma	Uses social media a lot
Pule	32	Male	St. Joseph Roma	Diploma	Uses social media a lot
Mathe	30	Female	St. Joseph Roma	Diploma	Uses social media a lot
Frank	34	Male	Mafikeng, Roma	Degree	Uses social media a lot
Sello	27	Male	Mafikeng, Roma	Diploma	Uses social media a lot
John	25	Male	NUL Roma Campus	Working towards a degree	Uses social media a lot
Maurine	35	Female	NUL Roma Campus	Diploma	Uses social media often

Neo	23	Female	NUL Roma Campus	Working towards a degree	Uses social media often
Mpho	22	Female	NUL Roma Campus	Working towards a degree	Uses social media every other day
Lineo	32	Female	Hata-Butle, Roma	C.O.S.C	Uses social media often
Jessica	27	Female	Hata-Butle, Roma	Diploma	Uses social media everyday
Paulina	26	Female	Ha-scout, Roma	Degree	Uses social media everyday
James	33	Male	St. Joseph, Roma	Degree	Uses social media everyday

Source: Research data

Regarding this diagram, a few points need to be made clear. First, most participants have a good level of education. The second is that they can comprehend social media use and its effects because of their education. This indicates that they can handle their social media accounts and are aware of the ramifications of their behaviour. Their strong dependence on social media constitutes the third factor. The fourth factor—that is, their inability to function without social media support—relates to this.

Other participants, including governmental officials and academics, are depicted in the following figure. Because the following individuals were essential informants on several crucial research areas, the interviews with them might be classified as expert interviews (Flick, 2014:227). These interviews were done as part of this study to confirm the opinions of other participants and to gain insight into the viewpoints of key informants, or experts, on the relationship between social media use and the risk of suicide in Lesotho.

Table 4.1b provides a detailed description of the four experts who took part in the study, offering a deeper understanding of the relationship between social media and suicide risk among young people in Lesotho.

Table 4.1b Description of experts who participated in the study

Pseudonym	Gender	Relevance to the Study
Thabo	Male	A nurse who once treated a lady who attempted suicide.
Mampho	Female	A researcher on issues relating to youth suicide in Lesotho.
Justice	Male	The police officer who was once called to a scene where a young lady attempted suicide by hanging.
Jackie	Female	A psychologist who deals with suicide cases often.

4.2 Social media as a social fact

Emile Durkheim saw social facts as social structures and cultural norms and values that are external to, and coercive of the individuals in a society (Ritzer, 2011). Examples of social facts include norms, currency, religion, language, beliefs, and others. These are external to the individual but coercive in shaping how a human being can think and behave. For instance, currency is a social fact as it is used in different societies, and it has the power to affect and influence individuals positively or negatively. Although Durkheim does not talk about social media, this study sought to argue that in the modern world, social media is a social fact that is currently exerting pressure on people to have a social media presence and it shapes how individuals relate to one another. For instance, many young people often feel pressured to behave in a particular way as presented on social media. The inability to cope with trends and fashion because of unemployment, for example, often causes young people to feel left out, and sometimes depressed.

The researcher uses the phrase “digital citizenship” to illustrate how young people literally “live” on social media for news, trends, and communication to get updated on their friends’ lives and other matters, albeit with negative consequences. Young individuals engage in online platforms as active citizens who abide by the rules of these platforms. Therefore, social media platforms have become a huge part of people’s lives that people cannot let go of. Participants’ stories highlighted that social media serves as an important spectrum for social belonging, social connection, self-expression, and community engagement, shaping their sense of identity.

Tied to that, is the pressure to post romanticised lives, using the latest phones with the latest technology. The researcher has introduced the phrase digital citizenship to

denote how young people literally “live” on social media to get updated on other people’s lives and the latest trends. News, job advertisements and communications are done through the power of social media. Participants in the study admitted to being active social media users obsessively. This was best captured in the following interview excerpt:

I use social media every day, all the time, even when I am in class. I always check Facebook because, honestly, I cannot live without it. These days, you miss out on opportunities if you do not have a social media presence.¹

Similarly, when asked about her social media usage patterns, another participant noted: *“I do not spend an hour without checking social media. You do not even have to make a conscious decision to check your socials; it just happens. I check my WhatsApp messages or Facebook all the time.”*² Also, Sello said, *“Social media is therapy; I simply cannot live without it. I check my social media accounts all the time. I also make TikTok videos, so I have to be on social media all day, every day.”*³

This study revealed that many young people rely heavily on social media in Lesotho, making social media a necessity in their lives. Most participants listed Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok as the social media platforms that they commonly use, with a few participants having active accounts on X, LinkedIn, and Instagram, which they do not use often. One participant, Neo, even asserted that she is addicted to social media. Thus, she said:

I like social media shame, even when I am in class, I always share content online. I share videos on TikTok, and I always enjoy making videos for Facebook, X, and WhatsApp. I can even say I am addicted to a certain degree because I can’t live without social media⁴.

Therefore, the study revealed a pattern of young students who use social media more than their working counterparts. Some participants reported using social media platforms for various reasons, such as *“posting, texting, sharing information and*

¹ Mariam, female March 2024.

² Lineo, female April 2024.

³ Sello, Male April 2024.

⁴ Neo, Female March 2024.

*interacting with friends*⁵. This supports Bilsen's notion that social media is essential to individuals' lives, serving as a platform for communication, information dissemination, and social engagement (Bilsen, 2018). I argue that the obsessive use of social media denotes citizenship, albeit with some negative consequences for some individuals.

Just like Durkheim, Leon Festinger's social comparison theory closely supports the idea that social media is a social fact since the current young generation seems to rely on social media a lot to pass information. Most of what goes on in young people's lives depends heavily on their social media presence, especially fashion, the latest dance trends and many other matters. Therefore, social media has opened the way for social comparisons, affecting how individuals relate. According to Paulina, a 26-year-old lady, young individuals always compare themselves with others on social media. Thus, she narrated: *"Yes, we do compare our lives to those of others on social media because we are constantly under pressure to be where others are in life or even be better than them"*⁶.

Furthermore, Festinger (1954) noted that humans consistently aspire to surpass or outperform others in various life aspects. Irrespective of the circumstance, one significant motivation for engaging in social comparisons appears to be the desire for accurate self-assessment, even though pursuing such insights about oneself can be riddled with biases. Consequently, social comparisons are typically portrayed as strategic processes executed to fulfil specific motives or objectives (Steers et al., 2014). People constantly evaluate themselves by looking at others in their social circles. Maurine, a young vendor, noted that:

A lot of young people are under pressure of what they see every day on social media. For instance, young people follow fashion trends on social media, which puts pressure on them always to afford the latest fashion. So, some individuals, if they see their friends affording things, they cannot afford to get depressed and resentful of their friends⁷.

⁵ John, Male March 2024; Mpho, female March 2024; Lineo, female April 2024; Mary, female March 2024; Paulina, female March 2024; Mariam, female March 2024; Neo, Female March 2024.

⁶ Paulina, Female March 2024.

⁷ Maurine, female March 2024.

4.3 Perceptions of social media benefits among youths

The study uncovered that many participants are aware of the potential benefits associated with using social media, such as access to job sites, staying connected with friends and family, offering room for self-expression, and accessing information free of charge.

4.3.1 Medium of communication

Social media is used as a medium of communication among people in Lesotho. One participant, Mpho, pointed out that social media makes it easy to communicate with her friends worldwide. She explained that:

I am a very social person, so I have friends in different countries that I have been fortunate enough to travel to, such as Namibia, South Africa, and Vietnam. So, we usually use social media to communicate easily and regularly⁸.

Furthermore, Dominic, another participant, stated that:

I like sharing news and talking with clients because I am a hawker. I engage with friends, keep up with current affairs and so on. So social media provides room to do all these things in one setting⁹.

In this sense, social media can be recognised as a platform for enforcing connectivity and connectedness among individuals in different geographical locations. According to Nielson (2010), social media networks, such as Facebook and Myspace, are essentially used for updating one's profile, enabling one to post a message on a friend's wall; comment on photo or video content of their own or others; posting photos or video content; join a group and play games. Bilsen (2018) supported this notion by acknowledging that social media has emerged as an essential component of individuals' lives, serving as a platform for communication, information dissemination, and social engagement.

Therefore, data collected in this study supports these notions and acknowledges that people use social media in various ways, but social media is generally used to foster communication among people. Julia noted that:

⁸ Mpho, Female March 2024.

⁹ Dominic, Male March 2024.

Social media makes it easy for me to communicate with other people, especially my friends who live far away from me, and share opinions and messages fast. It has made life easy because now, to get the news, I do not need things like newspapers¹⁰.

In Lesotho, people use social media to stay connected with their loved ones, form relationships and for introverted people to express themselves freely without judgement. To describe the importance of social media to stay connected, Melisa explained: *“I use social media to talk to my husband, who is currently away in a different country for work”*¹¹. Similarly, James noted:

I am a shy person, so social media provides room for me to communicate my views without fear as nobody sees me at that very moment, thanks to social media, I can be myself without fearing what people will say¹².

4.3.2 Access to opportunities

The study revealed that young people in Lesotho use social media to access opportunities easily. There is an influx of young people seeking growth opportunities on social media such as job opportunities and study scholarships. For James, a 33 years old male working at one of the hospitals around Roma, social media is a bridge to prosperity. The following excerpt from his interview illustrates his view:

Social media is a very strong weapon for career advancement; free short courses are advertised daily on social media, and I got my current job by applying for a job advertisement that was done on Facebook. So lately, you do not have to waste money buying a newspaper just to see job opportunities.¹³

Additionally, Paulina stated that *“some social media pages display job opportunities which are helpful to most people looking for employment opportunities, also there are a lot of pages sharing useful content such as weight loss program and diet”*¹⁴.

¹⁰ Julia, Female April 2024.

¹¹ Melisa, Female March 2024.

¹² James, Male March 2024.

¹³ James, Male March 2024.

¹⁴ Paulina, Female March 2024.

4.3.3 Boredom reliever

For some participants, social media offers them a sense of belonging, thereby relieving the boredom they feel when they are alone, Neo, a young woman noted:

Well, honestly, social media keeps me company. I am not a very vocal person; I consider myself an introvert, so social media offers solace when I am bored, and I do not feel lonely when I am online browsing through social media.¹⁵

Social media, being a boredom reliever, makes people feel less lonely as they find comfort in browsing through social media pages. It connects introverted people who may find it difficult to socialise offline to communities and interests they might not access offline, fostering a sense of belonging and community. Social media thereby fosters social integration and enhances social cohesion in societies as noted by the participants.

4.4 Perceived social media risks

The study uncovered perceived risks associated with social media usage, such as bullying, depression and anxiety, addiction and fostering unhealthy social comparisons.

4.4.1 Social comparisons

Through the findings of this study, it became apparent that social media has the potential to expose people to harmful content, online harassment, and addiction. Social media is a platform where young individuals openly engage in unhealthy comparisons which end up putting them at suicide risk. This was articulated by a post on Instagram stating, *“You can never be better than me with those fake curves. I was in this game before you, and I will always win. You come here with your fake Gucci thinking you are better than me”*.¹⁶ Also, Neo, a 23-year-old student at the National University of Lesotho, noted that:

There was a girl in my class who was heavily bullied on Facebook last year for wearing cheap clothes. She was someone active on social media and well known, so she posted a picture of herself wearing

¹⁵ Neo, Female March 2024.

¹⁶ Instagram user 1, April 2024.

designer boots and a jacket, claiming they were authentic. So, I do not know how social media users accessed her receipts because things got ugly a few minutes after that picture was posted. Someone else shared receipts of the items and exposed the girl for wearing cheap clothes while claiming they were expensive.¹⁷

The idea of being bullied because the girl did not abide by the standards of what is acceptable on social media is associated with high percentages of people who compare themselves with others (Tadesse et al., 2019). Therefore, social media platforms often promote a culture of comparison by encouraging users to share carefully curated versions of their lives, which may not accurately reflect reality. The constant exposure to perfected images and lifestyles can potentially lead to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem, especially among young people (Perloff, 2014). Pule, a 32-year-old nursing student, noted that he only shares what he feels people want to see on social media, sometimes not the entire truth. Thus, he narrated:

Social media pressures people to be perfect. So, honestly, I do not say much, but if I am expected to share aspects of my life, I spice them up a little bit because, honestly, looking at how successful other people are, you can be pressured to be like them, too.¹⁸

Thabo, a young man living in Roma, also states, *“Most young people are online to compete with others, especially to show their friends that they are winning”*.¹⁹ Therefore, social media puts young individuals in a tight spot to lead imaginary lives for clout. Social media opens space for people to constantly “throw shade” at each other openly and young people seem to lack awareness of the public nature of the internet (Acquisti and Gross 2006; Stutzman 2006; Barnes 2006; Shivambu, 2023).

4.4.2 Cyberbullying

According to Mathe, a young resident of Roma, *“Social media gives room for bullying, body shaming and constant desire to keep up with what other people are doing in*

¹⁷ Neo, Female March 2024.

¹⁸ Pule, March 2024.

¹⁹ Thabo, Male March 2024.

life”²⁰. Lineo, a 32-year-old street vendor, further notes that: “Social media gives room for people to discriminate against each other constantly, and it is heavily affected by cyberbullying as it offers room for people to have anonymous profiles”²¹.

The risks associated with social media usage seem to be universal across several countries. A study in Australia uncovered that young Australians navigate a range of challenges on social media, such as cyberbullying, management of personal information and privacy, discrimination and managing social comparisons (Collin et al., 2011). Social comparisons seem to be common among young people who use social media in Lesotho, and, according to social comparison theory by Leon Festinger, these happen when individuals self-evaluate by comparing themselves to others (Niels, 2017).

4.4.3 Depression and anxiety

Tied to the notion of cyberbullying and social comparisons is the idea that frequent social media usage is linked to accelerated rates of depression and anxiety among young people in Lesotho. Constant exposure to curated, well-articulated and idealised images and life events of others leads to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem in some people. This was well articulated in a note that a Facebook user who committed suicide left online. He narrated:

I see my friends wake up every day and go to work, but all I do is eat and sleep. I find myself liking and being a spectator as people share their achievements online, but I have nothing to share; I am a 30-year-old man with nothing to my name²².

Also, another user shared a post on social media: “I have been receiving death threats from an anonymous account for a while now, please help. I cannot continue like this; I think my abusive ex-husband is using Facebook to get to me”²³.

Depression is a real issue which requires attention as it puts young individuals at risk for suicide. This is in line with the Royal Society for Public Health (2017) assertion that in the United States of America, social media has been linked to heightened rates of

²⁰ Mathe, Female March 2024.

²¹ Lineo, Female March 2024.

²² Facebook User 1, April 2024.

²³ Facebook User 2, April 2024.

depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances, with recent research revealing a 70% surge in depression and anxiety attributable to social media usage over the past century. Another study conducted in the United Kingdom revealed that social media may contribute to feelings of anxiety and inadequacy (Paddock, 2012).

Social media opens room for individuals to compare their lives with their peers and for people to be bullied and hunted by anonymous accounts. Therefore, when faced with these situations, some people express feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth. People fall victim to depression and anxiety, which are serious mental health issues that may put individuals at risk for suicide.

4.4.4 Addiction

The findings of this study reveal that many people are aware of the potential risks of social media in Lesotho, and they list addiction as one of the many risks associated with social media usage. For instance, some participants were ready to admit that social media is addictive.

Young people are addicted to social media and a greater part of their lives is affected by social media. They spend too much time browsing through social media pages. They live to be validated on social media and end up selling fake narratives to their peers online, which sometimes requires them to always be online to see what their peers are doing. They post every little part of their achievements on social media due to the pressure of seeking validation, and this affects their mental health negatively when they do not get the validation they expect.²⁴

Similarly, Mampho, a young female researcher who is a resident of Roma, notes:

Social media addiction is a real issue, and most people are not even aware that they are addicted. Even in the middle of serious meetings, you will find young people in Lesotho browsing through their cell phones. I can guarantee that 90% of the time, they are on social media. These days, you cannot have a conversation with someone for an hour without them being destroyed by their cell phones.²⁵

²⁴ Monica, female March 2024.

²⁵ Mampho, female, March 2024.

In this study, the researcher found that many young people perceive social media as being addictive. Many people in Lesotho have become prisoners of social media, who instinctively browse through social media daily. Based on the findings, it is apparent that social media addiction is viewed as a way of life, not as a small part of their lives.

In addition, Frison and Eggermont (2016), which linked Facebook addiction to depressed mood in adolescents in America for most female participants, found that active Facebook use was associated with negative outcomes like depressed moods and social comparisons. Most participants noted that they had at one point been victims of cyberbullying, which caused them depression, but they continued to utilise social media all the time. The findings of the study support the notion that social media platforms have the potential to expose individuals to cyberbullying, negative comparisons, addiction, and unrealistic standards, thereby further influencing mental well-being (Zhu, 2021).

Furthermore, this study found that although many young people are aware of suicide, they are not informed about the potential effects of social media on their mental health, and they do not take cyberbullying as seriously as they should. Therefore, cyberbullying in Lesotho is a serious issue and its prevalence among young individuals represents a grave public health issue closely intertwined with behavioural patterns, mental health, and developmental processes (Raskaukas & Huynh, 2015; Bradshaw et al., 2017). Many participants were also not aware of available mental support teams in Lesotho that target the issue of suicide.

4.5 Perceptions of a link between social media and suicide risk

Participants readily acknowledged that there is a link between online social media usage and suicide risk in Lesotho, noting that social media harms other people's mental health. Participants showed knowledge of specific triggers associated with social media usage that could affect people's mental health negatively. For instance, Mpho, a young university student, asserted that she had to be off social media because it was exerting unnecessary pressure on her when her life was falling apart. She had lost her boyfriend to a girl who was her classmate at varsity. She noted that she nearly died of depression while they were busy posting each other and beyond that, Mpho narrated:

I was not getting a job and I felt that my friends were rubbing their successes on me whenever they posted themselves in a work uniform. Honestly speaking, if my parents did not take my cell phone while I was admitted at Mohlomi Hospital because I had a mental breakdown, I think I would have committed suicide for real.²⁶

Similarly, Lereko noted that mental health in Lesotho is not something that people talk about more often, especially among men.

I spent 3 years after graduating without a job or a way to make ends meet and as a man. I was pressured to provide for my family, but nothing beats the pressure that I felt due to my presence on social media. I truly felt like nothing when I saw my friends driving nice cars and affording things I could not afford. I was sinking into a hole of depression but as a man, I had to soldier on. I did not have any support as I had been orphaned a long time ago and I am the only child. Life after university can be brutal and I was truly left behind while my friends succeeded.²⁷

These statements by Mpho and Lereko show that social media has become a catalyst for an otherwise troubled country which has mental health issues. Many participants point towards hardships and suicide because of the inability to meet their needs. What becomes clear is that these suicidal thoughts are caused by a lack of social integration that Durkheim spoke about as characterising modernity, where people are characterised by individualism while others are prospering (Lukes, 1992). Here, it is clear that social media contributes to the erosion of societal norms and values, potentially affecting the mental well-being of young individuals. What becomes clear is that when one becomes in an unfortunate position, such as being unemployed, she/he is likely not to receive support either from the state or from relatives and friends, which causes a sense of loneliness and hopelessness. For instance, the constant comparison and pressure for validation on social media might create a sense of normlessness. At the core of comparison culture is individualism and accumulation under modern capitalism, which Durkheim critiques as part of structural problems causing anomie and destruction of societal bonds (Lukes, 1992).

²⁶ Mpho, Female March 2024.

²⁷ Lereko, Male March 2024.

Technicality, this presence of prospering individuals, while others become miserable without much to hold on to survive, resonates with the argument by Durkheim that lack of social integration often leads to suicidal thoughts (Ritzer, 2011). The Lesotho government cannot provide sufficient social security safety nets or some form of social insurance to cushion the poor from hardships, nor can the unemployed hope to be helped by others. This sense of evaluating oneself when one sees one's peers' prosperity does not always come from the point of jealousy. Rather, it is worsened by the inability to live a prosperous life because of a lack of money. Seeing one's peers' prosperity becomes a reflection of how one has failed in life.

Through analysis of social media content and interviews with participants, it has become apparent that suicide risk among young people is a result of various factors intersecting such as unemployment, relationship problems, social media content and poverty. In line with Durkheim's idea that suicide can be caused by social structures (Ritzer, 2011), social media is a social structure that fuels the fire of suicide among young people in Lesotho in several ways. Some participants noted that content shared without people's approval, such as "nudes", cyberbullying, social media backlash, and social comparisons, are among the biggest stressors that put young people at risk of suicide. As Jackie, a young psychologist, noted:

I have had several clients in the past year alone who were victims of some way of cyberbullying. I remember this girl whose parents called me to her home because she had suddenly withdrawn from everybody. She ended up telling me about how they had fallen out with her best friend, and she, in turn, uploaded her nude pictures online.²⁸

On the other hand, Justice, a young police officer, asserted:

Although I cannot say much about the cases we deal with, many young individuals bully and shame each other online. This other time, I was called to a scene where a young lady committed suicide, and as the story unfolded, we found out that she was shamed on social media.²⁹

²⁸ Jackie, Female April 2024.

²⁹ Justice, Male April 2024.

During the interviews, several participants acknowledged that a lot of them compare themselves with their peers on social media and this trend can be dangerous to their mental wellbeing. This was best captured by the following interview:

I was a top-performing student in high school. So that put pressure on me to always be on top. When I completed my degree, I wanted to go to America to further my studies but I could not secure the scholarship; there is this friend of mine who got admitted for the same scholarship. He would post every day on social media about preparations for his trip to America and that destroyed me, not that I was not happy for him, but it was like he was rubbing his success on me. My mental health was negatively affected by that incident.³⁰

The study found that many comparisons among young individuals in Lesotho resonate with Leon Festinger's social comparison theory, which states that individuals possess an inherent desire to evaluate themselves, often through comparisons with others (Festinger, 1954). Hence, individuals form judgements about themselves by comparing their circumstances to those of others, particularly within their social circles. In alignment with this theory, the study has discovered that young individuals in Roma, Lesotho, examine themselves according to what others think of them. Frank, a young man living around the Roma area, said:

I always feel good when I share a picture or content on social media, especially Facebook or WhatsApp, and it gets viewed or liked a lot. It is an amazing feeling. If people think I look good, then automatically my confidence is boosted"³¹.

This sense of the need for evaluation (and validation) from strangers online is deeply problematic and reflective of the strangeness of social structures. This need to be validated by strangers could be a sign of collapsing family values, which leads to poor self-esteem by young people. This shows that young people engage with social media in a vulnerable way, and cyberbullying becomes a catalyst which drives them towards suicidal ideation. Social media "likes" signal positive reinforcement showing social acceptance and validation of the participants' self-presentation and online identity. The

³⁰ Pule, Male April 2024.

³¹ Frank, Male April 2024.

fact that it has become a norm for individuals to seek validation through social media “likes” perpetuates a cycle of dependency on external approval and reinforces the importance of social media on self-esteem. Social media facilitates a culture of young people seeking external validation and approval from others.

Similarly, Mathe noted that:

Young people are competitive nowadays; you cannot say social media does not affect you. For example, I must dress according to how people dress on social media. Nowadays, wearing even the shortest skirts is becoming acceptable in Lesotho because that’s what social media influencers wear. Also, being liked on social media is an in thing, so I must look good too.³²

These stories show that young individuals are motivated to seek validation on social media to enhance their self-esteem and increase their social status, thereby reaffirming their sense of belonging. People become happy when they get likes and their pictures receive attention on social media because it confirms their perception of themselves as socially desirable and worthy of approval, but overreliance on likes and social media attention for self-esteem regulation may lead to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, depression, or low self-worth in the absence of social validation.

4.6 Perceived causes of suicide in Lesotho

The study found that participants have an idea of the problem that suicide poses for the country, and most participants see suicide as being a result of several factors, such as unemployment. This is in line with Emile Durkheim, who studied societal structures in the modern world, noting that when people do not feel connected to their social world, then they are likely to be suicidal (Luke, 1992).

Most trends on social media are based largely on materialism and if one does not have money, they become stressed and vulnerable to suicide risk. One of the participants, Mariam claimed that *“The major causes of suicide in Lesotho are currently unemployment, peer pressure, and relationship failures”*³³. Other participants such as John and Sindy also noted *“Unemployment, bullying, shaming and the pressure*

³² Mathe, female March 2024.

³³ Mariam, Female March 2024.

*people feel for keeping up with the Joneses (everybody) are the most common causes of suicide among young people in our country*³⁴. Sekants'i and Damane (2018: 938) noted that *“Lesotho has endured persistently high unemployment rates ranging between 23 percent and 28 percent over the past 10 years”*. High levels of unemployment have led to an increased number of the economically active being depressed. This is also best explained by Sindy who said:

I remember being unemployed and some of my friends participating in a social media trend where women were taking pictures of their degrees, iPhones, and cars. At that time, I only had a degree, not an iPhone and a car. Things like that can mess you up if you are not strong.³⁵

This is in line with a BBC Radio (2023) interview that was done by a psychotherapist in the Ministry of Health Lesotho, Ts'episo Siseoana, who mentioned factors such as the high unemployment rate and the government's inability to create jobs for young people as one of the major factors that increase suicide risk in the country. Unemployment is a serious issue that may produce catastrophic results for the country if not solved. Durkheim analysed suicide records, confirming that in the modern world, factors such as urbanisation, religion, occupation, and the rate of social change are attributed to the increase in suicide rates. At the same time, other studies linked suicide rates to non-social factors such as heredity and climate race (Babbie, 2010).

4.7 Coping strategies and support systems

The study discovered that there are distinctive coping strategies employed by young individuals whose mental health has been affected by social media usage. Some seem to “vent” online, addressing their issues openly, while others rely on their friend's support. Some resort to extreme measures such as suicide attempts. The researcher came across a post on social media where a user had addressed the fact that a friend was secretly in a relationship with her husband, and she had found out on social media. In a long rant, the anonymous user ranted:

I used to lend her my phone to call her parents when we were in school.
Little did I know that she took the opportunity to find my husband's

³⁴ John, Male March 2024.

³⁵ Sindy, Female, March 2024.

contacts, and they have been talking and sending pictures to each other for a year now; how do I move on?³⁶

The story of this Facebook user strongly supports Durkheim's ideas regarding modern societies, which he said are characterised by individualism in which individuals have the autonomy and freedom to pursue their interests and desires even if it means hurting their family members or friends. The lady lending her phone to a friend demonstrates an act of kindness and trust and an assumption that they have a close bond. However, her friend's betrayal suggests a breakdown in social integration as trust and mutual respect are compromised.

People were commenting on this post, which was made on Facebook, offering advice and supporting the user. The lady being comforted on social media is an indication that social media can help those struggling with mental health issues cope in certain instances. However, social media app tours also revealed that some people become suicidal because of being bullied and insulted on social media, where they went to seek help initially. For instance, James, one of the participants who fell victim to social media backlash, noted:

For the longest time, I was angry about what my friends had said about me online when I shared my story seeking help on getting a job, and a relative of mine booked me into the rehabilitation centre at Mohlomi Hospital in Maseru because I was not coping. Family and psychologists at Mohlomi Hospital in Maseru became my greatest pillars during that time.³⁷

Some individuals go to social media seeking social support when going through difficult times and according to Wright et al. (2014), social support is known to enhance mental, physical, and psychosocial well-being. Thus, the perceived social support offered through social media platforms can be advantageous for individuals who are at risk of suicide. This shows that James had a good intention of going online to seek social support. Still, he was harmed emotionally through exposure to bullying and insults by friends, leading to feelings of betrayal and suicidal thoughts. Coping strategies differ from individual to individual, but most people seem to understand the

³⁶ Facebook User 3, May 2024.

³⁷ James, Male March 2024.

importance of seeking medical advice when they are not feeling well. For Lineo, withdrawal from social media is the answer when she feels attacked and she notes:

Whenever I feel like my mental health is about to be affected by what others are saying about me on social media, I just deactivate my accounts to breathe and stay away from social media for a while. I cannot compromise my sanity for social media, but truly, you must be a strong person to survive social pressure.³⁸

Participants' use of coping mechanisms to deal with the negative impacts of social media on their mental health is evident from their acceptance of such consequences, particularly when it comes to other people's unfavourable remarks. Negative comments or cyberbullying on social media can cause tension, worry, sadness, and low self-esteem, according to research (Carlson et al., 2015). The participants show that they are self-aware and that they want to improve their health by identifying potential risks to their mental health.

4.8 Perceptions of intervention strategies

Most participants in the study, such as Dominic, Julia and Jessica, were not aware of available resources to assist victims of social media backlash, cyberbullying, or people suffering from depression due to social media. Dominic, a young man who grew up in Roma, stated that:

I have not seen any intervention strategies implemented in Lesotho directly in relation to suicide. Mostly, citizens come to social media reacting to somebody's death or passing a message about a certain topic and then providing resources on how to cope, but I am truly not aware of any help rendered to people who are suicidal.³⁹

Julia, a young woman who is a street vendor, also asserted that:

Well, I have not seen any online platforms in Lesotho where people can go if they are at risk for suicide, but I do know that if you are dealing with mental health issues, you can get evaluated at Mohlomi Hospital Maseru

³⁸ Lineo, Female, March 2024.

³⁹ Dominic, Male, March 2024.

or Motebang Hospital in Leribe district although people always complain about lack of mental health experts in these hospitals.⁴⁰

They were ignorant of any intervention strategies or agencies put in place to assist social media users in Lesotho, with Jessica stating:

Ah, are they even available “*habo rona moo*”. Well, if they are there, honestly, I have never seen or heard of any besides Mohlomi where they treat everybody with mental health issues⁴¹.

However, other participants acknowledged that social media provides the kind of support and attention they need when they are suicidal, for instance. Neo even noted that “*we need social media because sometimes when we are down, people on social media care for us even more than our friends or acquaintances*”⁴².

This supports the claim that social media has the power to sustain relationships and offer social and emotional support to those who might otherwise lose touch with each other in the absence of technology (Webb et al., 2022). Social media, thereby, in this instance, is a necessary “evil” because it may be dangerous to people, but most young people find it necessary. However, statements made by participants on the lack of knowledge regarding intervention strategies highlight the absence of dedicated online platforms or resources in Lesotho, particularly designed for suicide prevention and mental health support. In countries like America, online platforms and crisis hotlines play an important role in providing immediate support, resources and intervention for individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts or mental health crises.

4.9 Chapter summary

The findings of this study indicate that social media usage among young people in Lesotho is faced with a lot of challenges ranging from bullying to a lack of material resources. The pressure that people exert on each other to succeed has some negative results that have put others at risk for suicide due to deteriorating mental health. The study uncovered that the reasons why social media puts young people at risk for suicide are social, economic, and psychological. The next chapter provides a

⁴⁰ Julia, Female, March 2024.

⁴¹ Jessica, Female March 2024.

⁴² Neo, Female March 2024.

summary and discussion of findings and also looks into the recommendations for reducing suicide risk among young individuals in Lesotho.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS, SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The main goal of this study was to investigate how young people in Lesotho perceived a relationship between social media use and suicide risk. The study examined young Basotho people's lived experiences regarding how social media puts them at risk for suicide using Durkheim's theory on suicide and social comparison theory. The researcher looked at the various ways that social media use among young people in Lesotho makes them vulnerable to suicide as well as the various ways that suicidal individuals can get support.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: discussion of findings, summary of findings, thesis arguments and recommendations. The summary of findings demonstrates the extent to which this study answered the research questions by taking one research question at a time against the findings. The recommendation section seeks to advocate for better well-defined and regulated social media platforms.

5.1 Discussion of findings

The study's younger participants stated that they have been the victims of cyberbullying, which causes them great emotional anguish and may even fuel suicidal thoughts. Numerous studies examined for this study demonstrate a direct link between cyberbullying and mental health problems, which can result in suicide. For example, studies show a high correlation between being the victim of cyberbullying and a rise in suicidal thoughts and attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; van Geel et al., 2014).

Participants also agreed that social media has made it more likely for people to compare themselves to others, which has contributed to a rise in young people's poor self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. According to published research, social media encourages social comparisons since young people use it to share well chosen pictures of their lives, and frequent exposure to idealized social media lifestyles and photos results in low self-esteem for oneself as well as low self-esteem for others. According to Tadesse et al. (2019), a significant proportion of users use social media to compare themselves to other people. Moreover, persistent exposure to idealized portrayals of people's lives and appearances may result in low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, particularly in young people (Perloff, 2014).

The study also found that, despite these drawbacks, young people view social media as a support system where they can share their experiences and look for guidance on a range of topics. According to studies, a lot of young people feel more empowered and confident when they ask for help online, access information, and talk about difficult subjects (Gould et al., 2002). People mostly use the internet because they believe it to be a safer and more anonymous place to get assistance (Markham, 2013).

The study's findings also highlight the urgent need for targeted mental health intervention strategies that address challenges brought about by social media usage. Campaigns aimed at raising awareness about social media's negative impacts in Lesotho are needed. The study further underscores the need for strong regulatory measures to protect young people from harmful social media content.

Additionally, the study included two theories that provided useful insights into the connection between the use of social media and the risk of suicide. In Durkheim's theory of suicide, for example, interpersonal interactions within society are central to the theory. According to Durkheim, the degree of social integration and control in a society has an impact on suicide rates. As a result, the theory has assisted us in comprehending the nuances of the interaction between social media use and Lesotho society in the context of this study. The theory helped us understand whether social media has helped strengthen the bonds between people or weakened them. The study uncovered that social media has weakened the bonds between individuals in the sense that when one is being bullied online, nobody comes to the rescue; rather, they laugh at each other's demise. The study has also shown that social media has become a catalyst in increasing suicide risk, also because of structural problems such as unemployment, lack of social safety nets and other problems.

Furthermore, the theory of anomic suicide has helped to explore the chaos that happens on social media, which can be equated to the breakdown of social norms and lack of regulation, where young individuals have freedom of speech to derail anyone without consequences on social media. Social media in Lesotho is, thereby, like a normless society where people do as they please without thinking about society at large. Durkheim's theory, in this sense, has helped understand the individualistic nature of social media users, which ultimately puts others at suicide risk.

Conversely, the social comparison hypothesis states that people assess themselves according to how they compare to other people. Examining the connection between social media use and mental health in Lesotho was made easier by this notion. According to the study, young people in Lesotho are extremely miserable and have a higher chance of committing suicide because they feel less valuable and inferior to their friends and acquaintances on social media.

The theory helped explore that social media comparisons have shaped much of the culture of young individuals in Lesotho because most participants admitted to acting and dressing according to what they see on social media daily. Many trends based on material possessions on social media exist, where young people are pressured to achieve as much as their peers have achieved or dress in certain brands that are highly valued on social media. These trends leave many people with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, ultimately putting them at risk of suicide.

The theories helped establish a strong theoretical basis to explain the effects of continuous exposure to social media content in Lesotho. This significantly impacts self-esteem and body image, ultimately leading to mental health issues. The theories also helped the study establish that peer pressure on social media has led to diminished self-esteem for many Basotho youths.

While Durkheim's theory has clarified the structure of social media and relationships, Leon Festinger's social comparison theory was a great asset for understanding the psychological aspects of what goes on in people's minds on social media. These theories offered valuable insights into both the social structures and individual psychological processes that contribute to suicide risk, thereby helping to identify effective intervention strategies.

5.2 Summary of findings

5.2.1 Awareness of young individuals regarding social media usage and suicide risk

While investigating the overall awareness and understanding of young people regarding the possible impact of social media on suicide risk, the findings of this study revealed a worrying pattern of young individuals who are aware of the potential risks of social media usage but do not take the necessary precautions to protect themselves or others from social pressure.

5.2.2 Ways in which online social media usage increases suicide risk among the youths in Lesotho

Furthermore, to identify specific ways in which online social media usage increases suicide risk among the youth in Lesotho, the findings of this study were geared towards identifying patterns and common triggers related to social media usage. The study uncovered that social media is a strong catalyst for suicide risk among people already experiencing life pressures such as unemployment. Social media also exposes people to the possibility of engaging in unhealthy comparisons and cyberbullying, which end up being reasons for their depression.

5.2.3 The role of social media in shaping behaviours related to suicide among the youths in Lesotho

To understand the role of social media in shaping behaviours related to suicide among the youths in Lesotho, the study uncovered that certain types of content or interactions on social media influence individuals to act and behave in certain ways; for instance, participants readily agreed that certain cultures such as dress codes they copy through seeing social media influencers which easily erodes their cultures. Also, individuals tend to have low self-esteem which is rooted in how they are viewed on social media in Lesotho, which affects other areas of their lives.

5.2.4 Identify potential areas for improvement and propose new intervention approaches to address social media's negative impacts on mental health

Moreover, to identify potential areas of improvement in order to propose new intervention approaches to address the negative impacts of social media on mental health, the study gathered feedback from participants and established that many young people are not aware of any intervention programs tailored to reduce social media suicide risk in Lesotho. They are not aware of places where they can go to get help should they find themselves at risk of suicide, so participants advocate for the establishment of online support networks and online helplines tailored towards the reduction of youth suicide risk in Lesotho.

5.3 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how young people in Lesotho perceived any possible connection between using social media and an increased risk of suicide.

The growing prevalence of digital connectivity in Lesotho necessitates a critical knowledge of the intricate relationship between social media involvement and mental health outcomes.

The study adopts two approaches: an interpretivist approach and a constructivist ontology approach. It recognises that participants' interpretations and experiences are shaped by their unique cultural backgrounds, social contexts, and personal beliefs. Through in-depth interviews, participants were provided with a platform to share their narratives, perspectives, and insights on how social media influences mental health and suicide risk among youths in the Basotho community.

The first results indicate that participants' perceptions varied widely. Concerns regarding the detrimental effects of social media on mental health are voiced by some, who bring up problems including loneliness, cyberbullying, and social comparison. Others draw attention to the advantages of social media, like the ability to express oneself, interact with others, and find employment opportunities. This, therefore, highlights a need for legislation that protects social media users against bullying. The study also concluded that excessive social media usage can expose young individuals to dependency, cyberbullying, social comparisons and other negative effects.

The study also explored the role of cultural norms, social relationships, and socioeconomic factors in shaping participants' attitudes toward social media and mental health. Participants discussed how traditional Basotho values and expectations intersect with online behaviours, influencing perceptions of social media use and its potential consequences.

All told, the study sheds light on the intricate relationships between youth suicide risk in Lesotho and social media. The research adds to a better understanding of the consequences of social media use on mental health and well-being in the local setting of Lesotho by revealing the varied viewpoints and lived experiences of participants. Ultimately, the findings may inform interventions, policies, and support services aimed at promoting digital well-being and suicide prevention initiatives tailored to the needs of the Basotho population.

Also, the investigation into specific online platforms revealed a range of experiences and perceptions among participants. While some platforms, such as WhatsApp and LinkedIn, were identified as conducive to positive interactions and support networks,

other platforms, such as X, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, were perceived as breeding grounds for harmful content and negative interactions. The study found that public Facebook use was linked to depressed mood in young individuals. Due to people's ability to create anonymous accounts on platforms such as Facebook, most individuals can easily bully others without being traced in Lesotho, further increasing security concerns on social media platforms.

Again, participants' stories highlighted the different ways in which online interactions can impact psychological well-being. This underscores the need for tailored interventions that address the multifaceted nature of online experiences and provide targeted support to those at risk. Lastly, the exploration of potential solutions to address social media's negative impact underscored the need for collaboration among different stakeholders, such as governments, health practitioners, mental health experts, and the community.

Additionally, the study found that constant exposure to perfected images and lifestyles can potentially lead to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem, especially among young people. The gap between one's actual existence and the idealised online persona has the potential to create a sense of social isolation and contribute to the development of mental health issues, such as thoughts of suicide. People usually view others' attractive images on social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram and are likely to be dissatisfied with their self-image. These comparisons are likely to increase their negative emotions.

Consequently, there is a need for targeted intervention strategies that address the problem of suicide in Lesotho as suicide signifies a mental health crisis in the country. The country needs to invest in the development of proper mental health support networks employed by other countries.

All in all, the study contributes to a lack of knowledge and research on the intersection of social media, mental health, and youth well-being in Lesotho. By examining the voices and experiences of young individuals, I hope to inform holistic approaches to digital well-being that prioritise the psychological health and resilience of Basotho youths.

5.4 Recommendations for research, public and policymakers

This section of the study will focus on the presentation of recommendations based on the study's findings. The recommendations relate to what future researchers, Basotho people and policymakers can do to combat the problem of suicide in the country.

5.4.1 Recommendations for research

Future researchers should consider filling up gaps in the following areas:

- There is a need for long-term studies to track the impact of social media on mental health and suicide risk among young people over time;
- Track the causes of suicide in different districts of Lesotho;
- Effects of suicide on victims' families;
- Effects of cyberbullying on the youths in Lesotho;
- Effects of social pressure on individuals.

5.4.2 Recommendations to the public

- Use social media to spread positive messages and raise awareness about mental health issues.
- Encourage young individuals to support each other and participate in initiatives and campaigns that promote mental well-being.
- Take a stand against cyberbullying by educating young people about its consequences.
- Showcase positive role models who have overcome mental health issues.

5.4.3 Recommendations to policy makers

- There is a need for a suicide response strategy in Lesotho to reduce existing suicide rates.
- There is a need for the development of a policy that addresses cyberbullying and internet crimes.
- Implement educational programs that enhance digital literacy among young people through media and government's social media pages.
- Invest in accessible and youth-friendly mental health services. This may include training mental health professionals to address issues related to social media usage and suicide risk.

- Promote open conversations between different stakeholders, such as health workers, government officials, and young people, to establish the best ways to reduce suicide.
- Collaborate with international organisations and researchers to share knowledge, resources, and best practices for reducing suicide risk.

5.5 Chapter summary

The contents covered in this chapter include discussions of findings, a summary of findings, conclusions made out of the findings and recommendations to different stakeholders in order to address the gaps and challenges experienced by active social media users in Lesotho that may put them at suicide risk.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM

Dear prospective participant,

My name is Macce Mary-Louise Khalechane, and I am a student of a Master of Science in Health and Medical Sociology, from the Department of Anthropology, Sociology and Social Work under the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Lesotho.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled: **Exploring perceptions of a link between social media and suicide risk among young people: the case of Roma community, Maseru, Lesotho.**

The focus of the study is to uncover whether social media has the potential to expose young people to suicide risk in Lesotho. I am undertaking this study to understand the factors that contribute to increasing suicide rates among the youth in Lesotho and to find out whether social media does have a hand in increasing suicide.

Kindly take some time to go through the information presented here, which explains what your participation in this study involves. Feel free to ask me questions about the project and contact me and my supervisor Dr Mzingaye Brilliant Xaba at the National University of Lesotho at a later stage if you enquire further explanation or information about the study.

Please note that your participation in this study is voluntary and you have a right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Before you participate in this study, it is important that you fully understand the nature of the study, what will be expected of you and the risks and benefits involved. I do not foresee any risks involved in participating in the study. However, an indirect benefit is that your contribution in this study may help researchers and mental health professionals gain a better understanding of the role played by online social media on suicide risk in Lesotho, which may lead to improved prevention and intervention strategies.

Your identity and the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. All the data collected will be anonymized to ensure that you are protected, any names provided will be removed. Only the research team will have access to the collected data, and it will be stored securely.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor at:

Macce Mary-Louise Khalechane

marylouisekhalechane@yahoo.com

Contacts: 59347991

Msc Health and Medical Sociology

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of Anthropology, Sociology and Social Work

Dr Mzingaye Brilliant Xaba

Email: mb.xaba@nul.ls or mbxaba@yahoo.com

Lecturer, National University of Lesotho, Lesotho

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the attached declaration of consent.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT

I-----agree to take part in a research study entitled: **Exploring perceptions of a relationship between social media usage and suicide risk among the young people in Lesotho** conducted by Macce Mary-Louise Khalechane.

I declare that:

- I have read the attached information, and it is written in a language that I understand.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and seek clarity, and all the questions were adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and I have not been pressured into participating.
- I may choose to leave the study at any point, and I will not be penalised.
- All the issues concerning confidentiality have been clearly explained to me and the information provided has been explained to my satisfaction.

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

TITLE: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF A LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND SUICIDE RISK AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE: THE CASE OF ROMA COMMUNITY, MASERU LESOTHO.

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself. Your name, age, and Gender.
2. Do you use social media? A. Yes B. No
- If yes, how often?
3. In what ways do you use social media? (e.g. posting, commenting, texting or sharing)
4. Have you ever come across content related to suicide on social media? If yes, how often do you come across such content, and how does it make you feel?
5. Are you aware of any instances where social media has influenced or impacted someone's decision to attempt suicide or engage in self-harm?
6. Do you think social media can impact someone's decision to commit suicide?
-How?
7. Do you think social media platforms contribute to discussions about suicide among young people in Lesotho?
8. In your opinion, does exposure to social media content affect an individual's mental health?
-a) Yes b) No
9. Have you ever experienced any negative impact on your mental health due to exposure to such content on social media?
10. What are the kind of social media content that can make someone suicidal?
11. Are there any resources or support systems that you find helpful in dealing with suicide-related social media content?
12. What role do you think individuals using online social media platforms should play in preventing the spread of harmful content related to suicide and self-harm?
13. Do you think if people consumed their social media content, they would be less suicidal?
14. How do you think online social media can be used to promote mental health and well-being among the youth in Lesotho?

APPENDIX 3: KEY INFORMANTS' INTERVIEW GUIDE


1. What can you say are the major causes of suicide among young individuals in Lesotho?
2. Do you think social media can put young people at risk for suicide in Lesotho?
3. In what ways can social media put young individuals at risk of suicide?
4. Do you think social media affects people's mental health?
5. How can the mental health of young Basotho be improved?


APPENDIX 4: SIMILARITY CHECKPOINT

Macce Khalechane

MSC DISSERTATION FOR KHALECHANE

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