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# **The Influence of Social Media on Adolescents' Self-Esteem and Quality of Life**

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## **Abstract**

**Background and objective:** This study assesses the influence of social media usage patterns on self-esteem and quality of life among adolescents living in the Keyshero neighbourhood of Goma, DRC, in a context characterised by security instability. **Method:** A quantitative, descriptive and correlational approach was used with 100 participants aged between 13 and 18. The instruments used included the EES-10 for self-esteem, the WHOQOL-BREF for quality of life, and a structured questionnaire on patterns of social media use, namely active, passive, problematic and comparative use. **Statistical analyses,** including Student's t-test, Spearman's correlation and hierarchical linear regression, were employed. **Results:** The correlations between patterns of social media use and dimensions of quality of life were not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, 75% of the adolescents surveyed who reported a low quality of life were passive users, whilst 25% with a high quality of life were characterised by active use. Social comparison emerged as a positive and significant predictor of self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.326$ ;  $p = 0.035$ ), and

age exerted an influence ( $\beta = 0.210$ ;  $p = 0.040$ ). Gender did not show any significant difference ( $p = 0.942$ ). **Conclusion:** In this context of security instability, active use of social media is associated with a positive perception of quality of life, whilst social comparison acts as an adaptive and motivational mechanism rather than as a factor contributing to identity vulnerability. The study suggests conducting an in-depth analysis of the resilience factor among social media users.

**Keywords:** self-esteem; social media; quality of life; adolescents; social comparison; Goma; DRC.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background and rationale**

Adolescence refers to a pivotal period in human development, characterised by biological, cognitive and psychosocial changes. During this phase, adolescents are engaged in the process of identity formation and self-evaluation. These processes make them particularly susceptible to

environmental influences (Erikson, 1968; Sawyer et al., 2018). Against this backdrop of identity plasticity, digital social networks [DSNs] are reshaping the ways in which young people socialise and assess themselves (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp have now become essential spaces where identity is formed, comparisons and interpersonal influences take place, and representations of the self are assessed. The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] is no exception to this phenomenon.

In the DRC, and more specifically in the city of Goma, this phenomenon occurs within a unique context characterised by a dual vulnerability. Not only is there persistent insecurity linked to armed conflict and mass population displacement, but there is also rapid technological expansion of internet access, with penetration rates rising from 1 per cent in 2011 to 22.9 per cent in 2023, representing more than 23 million internet users (ARPTC, 2024). This combination highlights a fertile ground for analysing the psychosocial effects of social media on adolescents.

Self-esteem is an individual's overall assessment of their own worth (Orth & Robins, 2014). It is essential for adolescents' mental wellbeing. Low self-esteem is a risk factor for anxiety, depression and behavioural disorders (Keles et al., 2020). Similarly, quality of life refers to a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, psychological and social well-being (Fleck et al., 1999; Leplège et al., 2000). This provides insight into adolescents' overall health. The literature reports contrasting effects of social media on these two dimensions. On the one hand, there are harmful effects linked to upward social comparison, exposure to idealised images and passive use (Steinsbekk et al., 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2021). On the other hand, there are beneficial effects in terms of social connection, emotional support and a strengthened sense of belonging (Frison & Eggermont, 2015; Marciano & Viswanath, 2023). However, the majority of studies reviewed were conducted primarily in Western contexts, leaving a significant gap regarding sub-Saharan contexts and, in particular, environments affected by armed conflict.

## **1.2. Research problem and research questions**

The research problem centres on the question: how do patterns of social media use influence adolescents' self-esteem and quality of life? This question breaks down into two sub-questions: Is there a significant relationship between patterns of social media use and adolescents' quality of life? Which aspects of social media use predict the level of self-esteem among adolescents in Goma? These questions arise against a backdrop of psychosocial vulnerability caused by armed

conflict and a lack of research on the psychosocial effects of digital technology on adolescents. They aim to fill this gap by offering an analysis that is both descriptive and correlational, grounded in the specific lived experiences of young people in Goma. The objective is to analyse the influence of patterns of social media use on adolescents' self-esteem and quality of life in Goma. It also aims to identify predictors of self-esteem amongst sociodemographic variables and social media usage patterns. The hypothesis posits that there is a significant and negative relationship between passive social media use and adolescents' quality of life. Furthermore, it suggests that social comparison on social media significantly and negatively predicts adolescents' self-esteem.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Self-esteem in adolescence: definition and issues**

Self-esteem is one of the most widely studied concepts in developmental psychology. Rosenberg (1965) defines it as a positive or negative attitude towards oneself. It is operationalised through a subjective assessment of one's own worth. Orth and Robins (2014) emphasise that self-esteem follows a developmental trajectory characterised by instability in early adolescence. It stabilises over time as one gets older. Adolescence is a period highly susceptible to social and environmental influences. During this time, self-esteem revolves around several dimensions, such as physical appearance, academic ability, interpersonal relationships and social acceptance (Sawyer et al., 2018). These are the very dimensions that social media emphasises. This makes this dynamic, competitive and creative sphere a fertile ground for both positive and negative psychological effects. Low self-esteem is a documented risk factor for the development of anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as risky behaviours (Keles et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

In the African context, and particularly in emergency settings such as Goma, self-esteem takes on a specific dimension. It acts as a factor in psychological resilience in the face of trauma, loss and instability (Bandeira et al., 2023). Seymour (2020) has carried out research in this field with adolescents in Kivu. He notes that positive identity resources, notably stable self-esteem, enable young people to maintain a sense of hope for the future despite adverse conditions.

### **2.2. Quality of life and adolescent well-being**

Quality of life is a multidimensional construct that encompasses both objective and subjective dimensions of well-being (Leplège et al., 2000). The WHOQOL-BREF instrument, developed by the World Health Organisation,

assesses four dimensions: physical health, psychological health, social relationships and the living environment (Fleck et al., 1999). For adolescents, quality of life is influenced by the dynamics of relationships, a sense of security, emotional resources and the socio-cultural context. Diener and Seligman (2004) emphasise that adolescents' subjective well-being depends more on their perception of the psychological resources available to them than on objective conditions. This perspective is relevant in the context of Goma, where objective living conditions are often unfavourable. Nevertheless, adolescents can still maintain a positive perception of their well-being thanks to individual and collective resilience mechanisms and personal characteristics.

The role of social media in adolescents' quality of life is a poorly documented area of research. Twenge et al. (2018) documented a negative correlation between increased screen time and indicators of well-being among American adolescents after 2010. However, Odgers and Jensen (2020) criticise these findings, pointing out that the effects are moderate, context-dependent, and often not transferable to non-Western populations.

### **2.3. Social media and self-esteem**

The literature reviewed highlights the explanatory mechanisms that account for the influence of social media on self-esteem. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954, cited in Vogel et al., 2014) provides the theoretical framework for this study. Individuals evaluate their attitudes, opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others. The process by which social media increases the degree of continuous exposure to idealised representations of other people's lives.

According to Vogel et al. (2014), in the digital world, social comparison takes two forms. Firstly, upward comparison, which is directed towards individuals perceived as superior, tends to reduce self-esteem and well-being. Secondly, downward comparison, which focuses on individuals perceived as inferior, can boost self-esteem. Kross et al. (2013) note that upward comparison is predominant due to the idealisation of the self that characterises these social media platforms (Kross et al., 2013). From this perspective, Valkenburg et al. (2021), in a longitudinal study, used the Experience Sampling Method with 2,155 Dutch adolescents. They highlighted that the impact of social media on self-esteem depends less on-screen time than on the nature of the experiences encountered online. Positive interactions boost self-esteem, whilst negative experiences—such as cyberbullying and derogatory content—undermine it. This study highlights the concept of personal susceptibility as a moderating variable. Steinsbekk et al. (2021), in a three-wave

longitudinal study involving 800 adolescents, demonstrated that social comparison-oriented use leads to a decline in appearance-related self-esteem between childhood and adolescence. This study provides a relevant methodological contribution to differentiating effects according to age and developmental stage. The distinction between active and passive use represents a major advance in this field (Burke & Kraut, 2016). Active use, characterised by content posting, direct interactions and communication, produces positive psychological effects such as an increased sense of social connection and self-efficacy. However, passive use is characterised by the consumption of others' content without interaction. This form of use contributes to an increase in upward social comparison and a decrease in well-being (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

### **2.4. Social media and quality of life**

Kelly et al. (2018), drawing on data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, demonstrated that intensive use of social media is associated with a decline in subjective well-being among adolescent girls, with mediating effects linked to sleep quality, cyberbullying and body dissatisfaction. These findings confirm the complexity of the mechanisms of influence and the relevance of multivariate analytical approaches. In a similar vein, Boers et al. (2019), in a longitudinal study involving 3,826 Canadian adolescents, linked screen time spent on social media with an increase in depressive symptoms. They note that the magnitude of this effect is modest and that contextual factors such as the quality of family relationships, academic support and economic insecurity play a significant moderating role. Marciano and Viswanath (2023) have proposed a nuanced perspective. On the one hand, certain uses of social media contribute positively to adolescent flourishing, particularly when they facilitate authentic connections, emotional support and creative self-expression. Furthermore, these authors suggest a differentiated approach that goes beyond simply measuring screen time to incorporate the quality and meaning of digital experiences.

Woods and Scott (2016) found that social media use in the evening is associated with a deterioration in sleep quality, a known factor in the decline of quality of life and self-esteem. This association is particularly pronounced among adolescent girls. Their findings illustrate how social media influences quality of life through indirect pathways, mediated by health behaviours. Despite the growth in social media use in sub-Saharan Africa, psychological research into its effects on African adolescents remains very limited. The majority of the studies reviewed were conducted in high-income countries such as the United States, Western European countries and

Australia. This is a context in which adolescents experience entirely different living conditions. This poses methodological limitations regarding the psychological mechanisms identified, which cannot be directly applied to an environment characterised by precariousness, insecurity and distinct family and cultural contexts. Odgers and Jensen (2020) explain in their review that the majority of studies on social media and adolescent mental health suffer from significant sampling biases, such as a lack of sample representativeness, methodological problems of reverse causality, and uncontrolled confounding variables. They suggest diversifying the study context to test the generalisability of existing theoretical models. The present study responds to this call by proposing an empirical analysis within the African context of armed conflict, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and universally valid understanding of the psychosocial effects of social media on adolescents.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Research design**

This study followed a descriptive and correlational quantitative design. The descriptive approach enabled us to identify patterns of social media use and levels of self-esteem and quality of life within the sample. The correlational approach enabled us to objectively assess the relationships between these variables, whilst hierarchical regression enabled us to identify significant predictors of self-esteem. This research design is appropriate for this study.

#### **3.2. Population and sample**

The target population consists of adolescents aged 13 to 18 living in the Keyshero neighbourhood of Goma and attending secondary schools. Stratified probability sampling was used, with stratification by gender and school. The final sample comprised 100 participants, including 65 girls and 35 boys, all recruited from two schools, the Uwezo Institute and the Totoro Institute, with 50 pupils from each school.

The inclusion criteria were: being aged between 13 and 18, living in the Keyshero neighbourhood, using at least one social media platform, and having obtained parental consent or the consent of a legal guardian. Exclusion criteria included the presence of a diagnosed psychiatric disorder likely to affect the participants' understanding of the questionnaires.

The sample size,  $N = 100$ , is considered sufficient for the planned correlational analyses, based on Cohen's (1988) recommendations. Data collection took place in October 2025.

#### **3.3. Measurement instruments**

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (R-SES-10), a unidimensional scale, comprises 10 items that assess overall self-esteem on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Total scores range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. The validated French version was used. The EES-10 exhibits excellent psychometric properties, with internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) generally ranging between 0.77 and 0.88 in studies involving adolescents. The WHOQOL-BREF is a WHO instrument that assesses quality of life through 26 items covering four domains: physical health, psychological health, social relationships and environment. Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale. The French version validated by Fleck et al. (1999) was used. The WHOQOL-BREF demonstrates satisfactory discriminant and concurrent validity across multiple cultural contexts. A structured questionnaire on social media use was developed to assess four modes of use. Active use, which refers to the publication of content and direct interaction; passive use, which refers to browsing without interaction; problematic use, involving compulsive behaviour that affects daily activities; and social comparison, which refers to the tendency to compare oneself with others on social media. These items were inspired by Keles et al. (2020) and Valkenburg et al. (2021).

#### **3.4. Data collection procedure**

The questionnaires were administered collectively in class, under the supervision of the principal investigator, in October 2025. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, data confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant and, in the case of minors, from their parents. The administration time was approximately 35 to 45 minutes. Questionnaires that were incomplete or exhibited suspicious response patterns were excluded.

#### **3.5. Statistical analyses**

The analyses were carried out using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive analyses (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were used to characterise the sample and the distributions of the variables. Student's t-test for independent samples was used to compare mean self-esteem scores by gender. Spearman's correlations were calculated to assess the associations between patterns of social media use and scores for self-esteem and quality of life, due to the non-normal distribution of certain variables. Hierarchical linear regression was used to identify significant predictors of self-esteem in three successive blocks: sociodemographic variables,

quantitative usage variables, and qualitative usage variables. The threshold for statistical significance was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$  for all analyses. Effect size was assessed using the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  for regression and the correlation coefficient  $r$  for correlational analyses, in accordance with Cohen's (1988) conventions:  $r < 0.10$  (negligible effect),  $0.10 \leq r < 0.30$  (weak effect),  $0.30 \leq r < 0.50$  (moderate effect),  $r \geq 0.50$  (strong effect).

### 3.6. Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles governing research in the social sciences. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the data collected would be kept confidential. The data were anonymised and stored securely. Participants showing signs of psychological distress were referred to the available psychosocial support services.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

**Table 1:** Distribution by gender

| Gender       | Frequency  | Percentage   |
|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Female       | 65         | 65.0         |
| Male         | 35         | 35.0         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

The table highlights a clear predominance of women (65 per cent) over men (35 per cent).

**Table 2:** Levels of self-esteem by platform used

|                      |          | Platforms used              |                   |                  | Total |
|----------------------|----------|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------|
|                      |          | TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat | Facebook, Twitter | YouTube, Discord |       |
| Level of self-esteem | Very low | 14                          | 2                 | 0                | 16    |
|                      | Low      | 62                          | 7                 | 1                | 70    |
|                      | Medium   | 9                           | 3                 | 0                | 12    |
|                      | High     | 0                           | 1                 | 1                | 2     |

With regard to social media use, the majority – 85% of participants – report using TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. However, their self-esteem is low.

**Table 3:** Comparison by type of social media platform

| Platforms                   | Average        | N          | Standard deviation |
|-----------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------------|
| TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat | 26.7647        | 85         | 6.53133            |
| Facebook, Twitter/X         | 25.3077        | 13         | 8.65433            |
| YouTube, Discord, Twitch    | 27.5000        | 2          | 0.70711            |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>26.5900</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>6.74813</b>     |

A comparison of average self-esteem scores across different types of social media reveals a nuanced trend, although the analysis is purely descriptive. Out of an overall average score of 26.79, it is noted that the use of platforms focused on visual and ephemeral content (TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat;  $M=26.8$ ) and those for video/streaming (YouTube, Discord, Twitch;  $M=27.5$ ) is associated with low self-esteem scores. At the same time, the use of older platforms centred on text or traditional social connections (Facebook, Twitter/X) is linked to the lowest average ( $M=25.71$ ).

**Table 4:** Frequency of use by self-esteem

|             | Hours per day on social media |                   |              |              |              | Total |
|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------|
| Self-esteem | Less than 1 hour              | More than 2 hours | More 4 hours | More 6 hours | Plus 7 hours |       |
| Very low    | 12                            | 2                 | 0            | 2            | 0            | 16    |
| Low         | 2                             | 22                | 25           | 16           | 5            | 70    |
| Average     | 10                            | 2                 | 0            | 0            | 0            | 12    |
| Strong      | 1                             | 1                 | 0            | 0            | 0            | 2     |

Daily usage time ranges from less than one hour (23 per cent) to more than four hours (25 per cent), with an average of 2.4 hours per day. The frequency of use is higher than normal.

**Table 5:** Correlation between self-esteem and passive use of social media

| Correlations              | Total Rosenberg | Passive use |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Correlation coefficient   | 1.000           | 0.243       |
| Significance (two-tailed) | .               | 0.015       |
| N                         | 100             | 100         |

Spearman's correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) indicates a weak positive association between self-esteem scores and passive social media use ( $\rho = 0.243$ ). This correlation reaches the threshold for statistical significance ( $p = 0.015$ ), which allows us to reject the null hypothesis of no association. In other words, the higher the level of passive social media use, the lower the self-esteem score. These results are counter-intuitive compared with theoretical predictions. Passive use and social comparison are positively associated with self-esteem in this sample. This suggests that the psychological valence of these mechanisms may be modulated by the socio-cultural context.

**Table 6:** Quality of life according to social media usage style

| Quality of life | Non-passive | Passive | N   |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|-----|
| Low             | 25.0%       | 75.0%   | 26  |
| Medium          | 48.8%       | 51.2%   | 38  |
| High            | 74.4%       | 25.6%   | 36  |
| Grand total     | 50.0%       | 50.0%   | 100 |

Spearman's correlation analyses reveal that the associations between patterns of social media use and dimensions of quality of life are not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The highest correlations, although not significant, concern the relationship between passive use and psychological health ( $\rho = -0.176$ ;  $p = 0.079$ ) and between active use and environmental health ( $\rho = 0.179$ ;  $p = 0.077$ ).

However, analysis of the distribution of quality-of-life levels by type of use reveals a notable descriptive trend. Individuals with a low quality of life are predominantly passive users (75.0% versus 25.0% non-passive), whilst those with a high quality of life are characterised by predominantly active use (74.4% non-passive versus 25.6% passive). Individuals with an average quality of life show a more balanced distribution (51.2 per cent passive vs 48.8 per cent non-passive). These descriptive data suggest a clear gradient: the more active and interactive social media use is, the higher the perceived quality of life tends to be.

## 5. Discussion

The absence of significant correlations between patterns of social media use and aspects of quality of life is a key finding of this study. This finding is consistent with the nuanced views of Odgers and Jensen (2020), who conclude that the effects of screen use on adolescents' mental health are generally modest, often non-significant in rigorous methodological designs, and highly context-dependent. In the context of Goma, several factors may explain this lack of a direct effect. Firstly, economic precariousness and security instability are structural determinants of quality of life that overshadow the influence of social media. Adolescents in Goma face existential challenges (access to food, education, physical safety) that put the impact of digital experiences on their overall well-being into perspective. Secondly, the use of social media in this

context is likely to be more pragmatic and functional – such as accessing information and maintaining contact with displaced loved ones – rather than recreational or comparative, which reduces exposure to the harmful mechanisms identified in Western contexts.

The descriptive trend observed—notably that passive users are over-represented among those with a low quality of life, whilst active users are more common among those with a high quality of life—is, however, consistent with the findings of Frison and Eggermont (2015), who distinguish between the differing effects of active and passive use on well-being. Although this association was not statistically significant in our study, it suggests a direction of effect that warrants further exploration in future studies with larger samples.

The most surprising finding of this study is the positive direction of the relationship between social comparison and self-esteem. Contrary to the predictions of classical social comparison theory (Vogel et al., 2014) and the findings of Kross et al. (2013), social comparison is positively associated with self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.326$ ;  $p = 0.035$ ). This finding can be interpreted in the light of the work by Marciano and Viswanath (2023), who distinguish between motivational upward social comparisons and unfavourable upward comparisons. In an emergency context, adolescents may use social comparison as a mechanism for inspiration and positive projection, by observing peers or role models who have successfully overcome similar challenges. This interpretation is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, according to which individuals can use social comparisons as sources of motivation towards competence and autonomy. Steinsbekk et al. (2021) demonstrated that the effects of social comparison vary significantly according to age and developmental stage. In a humanitarian crisis context, older adolescents may develop a level of cognitive sophistication that enables them to modulate the emotional valence of social comparisons. This hypothesis warrants testing in future studies using complementary qualitative methodology.

The paradoxical positivity of social comparison in our sample could also be explained by differences in the platforms used and the types of content consumed. In Goma, adolescents primarily use WhatsApp (78 per cent) and Facebook (62 per cent), platforms geared more towards interpersonal communication than towards idealised self-presentation, unlike Instagram or TikTok, image-centred platforms where unfavourable upward comparisons are more frequent (Lup et al., 2015).

The absence of a significant difference in self-esteem by gender ( $p = 0.942$ ) contrasts with several studies reporting that adolescent girls are more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media on body image and self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2018; Steinsbekk et al., 2021). In the context of Goma, this convergence in self-esteem levels between the sexes may be explained by the shared stress experienced by the community. Exposure to insecurity, displacement and precarious living conditions affects adolescents regardless of gender, creating common sources of vulnerability and resilience. This interpretation is consistent with the work of Sawyer et al. (2018), who highlight that in low- and middle-income contexts, gender differences in adolescent mental health indicators are often mitigated by common structural factors such as poverty, insecurity and inequalities in access to healthcare.

Despite the strengths of this study, there are some limitations that must be taken into account. In particular, the cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for the establishment of causal relationships between the variables. The observed associations could be bidirectional or explained by unmeasured confounding variables. The sample size limits the statistical power to detect small effects and restricts the possibility of subal group analyses. The sample is limited to two schools in a neighbourhood of Goma, which limits the generalisability of the results to all adolescents in the city. The study suggests a longitudinal design using representative samples to overcome these limitations. The incorporation of qualitative methods would also allow for a better understanding of the meanings attributed to digital experiences within this specific cultural context.

## 6. Conclusion

This study makes an original contribution to psychology by examining the relationships between social media use, self-esteem and quality of life in an African context characterised by exposure to armed conflict. The results reveal a nuanced reality that differs significantly from the theoretical models developed in Western contexts. The main conclusions can be summarised as follows. Social media use does not have a direct or significant influence on the quality of life of adolescents in Goma, suggesting that structural and contextual factors play a predominant role in determining the well-being of these young people. Individuals who actively use social media tend to report a better quality of life, whilst passive users predominate amongst those with a low quality of life. These findings argue for a contextualisation of theoretical models concerning the psychosocial effects of social media. In a humanitarian crisis environment, adolescents appear to develop resilient digital usage strategies, transforming social

media into spaces for connection, inspiration and positive identity formation rather than sources of psychological vulnerability. In practical terms, these findings highlight the importance of promoting active and interactive use of social media among adolescents in Goma, whilst developing digital literacy programmes that strengthen emotional regulation and critical thinking skills in relation to online content. Integrating these dimensions into psychosocial support programmes for adolescents in crisis contexts represents a promising avenue for intervention.

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