

**IT'S NICE TO HAVE A FRIEND: THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULTS'  
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND HOW IT INFLUENCES THEIR SOCIAL CAPITAL**

A BACHELOR'S THESIS

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Young adults currently make up one of the most prevalent groups on social media. Different findings about the impact of social media on social capital have resulted in mixed results regarding the relationship. In turn, researchers proposed three different hypotheses on the nature of this relationship; the poor-get-richer (social compensation), the rich-get-richer (social enhancement) and more recently the rich-get-poorer hypothesis. The social compensation theory argues that individuals that have an established social network benefit from social media most, while the social enhancement theory proposes that individuals with a lack of a social network benefit most. New findings suggest that individuals in established friend groups may feel less connected to them due to social media usage. This study aims to focus on the currently neglected individual experiences and investigate young adults' perceptions on how social media usage impacts their social capital.

**Methods:** 8 undergraduate students (75% female, mean age 21,63) were interviewed via semi-structured interviews. Participants were excluded if they did not use social media or were incapable of giving written informed consent. Interviews were thematically analyzed into themes and codes.

**Results:** Four key themes were identified, social media, social network, experiences regarding social capital on social media and suggestions for social media. This study reveals that undergraduate students know the meaning of social support system and are generally content with the community that it consists of. It also shows moderate support for students' views regarding the rich-get-richer hypothesis and little support for the poor-get-richer hypothesis on social capital. While students liked the potential of meeting like-minded people and sharing media with friends, doom-scrolling and social comparison seemed to highlight negative feelings like loneliness.

**Conclusions:** This study has shown insights into personal experiences about how socially rich individuals can benefit from social media usage with their pre-existing friend groups and how some individuals have experienced meaningful relationships towards friends or partners through social media. More research regarding personal perceptions regarding social capital and social media is needed in the future.

**Keywords:** Social media, Social support system, Students, Social capital, Qualitative

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## **Introduction**

### **Social capital and mental health**

Social relationships have always been deemed important to people's lives and living as communities within a society. In recent years, the term social capital has been coined and research regarding its definition and impact has been growing (Rotenberg et al., 2004, Sørensen, 2021). Social capital describes the sum of resources and support provided by one's social network of e.g. friends, families, neighbors or communities (Lin, 2008; Richardson et al., 2022). Vonneilich (2022) found that important factors for effective social support are the dynamic of social networks and the level it is assessed on. Different levels, e.g. include friendship networks or one's community within a neighborhood or an academic institution on a broader level. Perhaps not surprisingly, have found that trusting relationships and high levels of support within those networks have consistently shown a protecting effect on fear and stress during the COVID pandemic compared to people with less social capital (Snel et al., 2022). Additionally, big high quality networks of peers, family and trusted adults among school children aged 0-19 seem to less behavioral problems and better mental health among a body of research (Bosacki et al., 2007; DuBois et al., 2002; Rotenberg et al., 2004; Springer et al., 2006). Similar to school aged children and youth, Iqbal et al. (2023) have found that Pakistani university students that possess more social capital tend to be happier and mentally well. In this study, social capital was measured among the three dimensions bonding, bridging and linking, describing different dynamics of social networks (Iqbal et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000 as cited in Iqbal et al., 2023). All resulted in higher levels of happiness and well-being, supposedly due to feelings of connectedness and more available resources and possibilities (Iqbal et al., 2023; Sørensen, 2021).

### **Social capital and social media**

Relating social relationship, social media has become a common tool to connect and communicate with friends through self-disclosure, creating meaningful relationships (Gray, 2018; Lenhart, 2024). Therefore, a relevant question is how social media impacts people's social capital and in turn their mental well-being. Especially young adults are frequent users of social media platforms. In a sample of 1502 adults in the US, the majority of individuals aged 18-29 used social media, and 48 % reported being online nearly all the time (Faverio, 2022). Faverio (2022) found that this group reported the highest frequency of being online compared to all other age groups. Therefore, especially the effect of social media on people's social capital has been a research topic with increasingly more interest in the past years. Results regarding this topic tend to be mixed (Braghieri et al., 2022, Coyne et al., 2020, Naslund et al., 2020). Anxiety and depression were two common outcomes in this context, with anxiety relating to obsessively checking messages from friends (Karim et al., 2020) and depression due to seeing only curated images of other users having fun (Neira & Barber, 2014). Especially image focused platforms like Instagram were frequently reported as being the source of comparisons to people perceived as better in an area than oneself (upward comparison). However, cause and effect are not always clearly defined. Underwood and Ehrenreich (2017) found that adolescent with mental health issues tend to engage in more passive activities like scrolling and look for content that matches their negative mood. This means that social media could also act as a tool intended to validate pre-existing negative feelings and feel understood. On the contrary, adolescents with solid social relationships used active ways like communicating with friends online, which further solidified these relationships in both contexts (Lee, 2009). Additionally, a majority of a US teen sample reported feeling more connected because they see updates about their friends and that it is easier to feel supported and support friends in times of crisis (Lenhart, 2024). 57% of these

teens have also made a friend online, although meeting this friend in person is seemingly rarer with only 20 % having done so in the past (Lenhart, 2024).

### **Rich-get-richer, rich-get-poorer and poor-get-richer hypotheses**

Regarding this relationship, there is an ongoing debate between mostly two theories on the relationship between social media and social capital. The rich-get-richer hypothesis, determined by high social support or low loneliness, suggests that individuals with stable relationships and high levels of extraversion in the real world have those traits mirrored in the online world and gain even more social capital through social media use (Kraut et al., 2002, Valkenburg et al., 2007). On the contrary, the poor-get-richer, hypothesis, determined by low social support or high loneliness, assumes that social media can help individuals who have difficulties building relationships in real life can use social media to make up for the lack of capital in real life (Cheng et al., 2019, Frison & Eggermont, 2020). More recently, it was suggested that there is a third hypothesis, namely a rich-get-poorer effect, possibly because of a shift to more communication with friends through social media as opposed to real life (Pouwels et al., 2021).

### **Social capital and individual differences**

When looking at these hypotheses, researchers hypothesized that these findings may relate to differences in character traits. Firstly, when testing for differences in the traits extraversion and introversion, measured by level of arousal, in 209 undergraduate students, there was support for all three hypotheses. Moore and McElroy (2012) found that more neurotic participants reported a higher time spent on social media, higher introversion and emotional stability were related to mainly using it to connect with friends. Additionally, in this sample the top 10% of extraverts had over 484 more Facebook friends than the bottom 10 % of introverts, implying that extraverts possess a bigger social network (Moore & McElroy, 2012). Therefore, this study suggests that individual differences influence social media usage,

which in turn possibly has different impacts on peoples' social capital. Pouwels et al. (2022) reviewed research regarding the hypotheses and found that results are unclear, partly based on different conceptualizations of "being rich", different variables tested and different methodology. They found similar results regarding individual differences in Dutch adolescents (Pouwels et al., 2022). This suggestion is also based on their previous study that resulted in highly mixed results. In this study, Dutch adolescents were asked to fill out short surveys regarding feelings of friendship loneliness and support over the span of three weeks and a follow-up survey after three months. Social media use had negative effects on friendship closeness for the majority of participants short-term, while 17% benefited from its use (Pouwels et al., 2021). Regarding those 17 %, the socially rich experienced a long-term benefit, while the socially poor only benefited during the first three weeks of the study (Pouwels et al., 2021). These results provide support for a short-term rich-get poorer effect based on loneliness, and that short-term and long-term effects of social media can differ between groups. Compared to this, adolescents seemingly use the internet to meet people if their home life is chaotic or there is a lack of friendships in real life (Mesch & Talmud, 2006; Wollak et al., 2003) providing support for the poor-get-richer hypothesis under specific circumstances. All in all, based on sample, methodology and focus of the studies, results regarding people's experiences with social capital through social media vary significantly to date and more research is needed in this area.

### **Current research**

Many present studies have used a quantitative approach (Kraut et al., 2002, Frison & Eggermont, 2015, Moore & McElroy, 2012), while some also used a particularly young age group (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, Pouwels et al., 2021). Since a majority of young adults between 18-29 use social media and nearly half spend a significant part of their free time



engaging in this activity (Faverio, 2022), it can be assumed that this age group in particular notices an influence of social media on their lives and social relationships. While three different hypotheses on how social media and social capital may influence each other have been tested, data on individual experiences and perceptions is still largely missing, especially regarding the rich-get-poorer hypothesis (Pouwels et al., 2021). In turn, personal experiences are often lacking and generally support regarding these three social capital hypotheses are mixed, possibly due to different methodology and variables being used. As Pouwels et al. (2022) suggested, testing large groups as a homogenous entity seemingly has not produced clear results in the past, implying that personal statements will provide a clearer picture. For this reason, using a qualitative approach will help to gain a more rich, detailed understanding of individual opinions and personal factors coming into play. Findings could provide insights on both socially poor and rich individuals and potential differences in their perceptions on social media. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how young adults experience the relationship between their social capital and social media usage.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and setting**

For this study, recruitment through Instagram stories and snowball sampling were the main tools to reach the intended target group. Inclusion criteria consisted of being a young adult between the ages of 18–29, social media usage of at least one platform and fluency in English or German. Participants were not included if they did not agree to the conditions of informed written consent or did not use social media. Ethical approval was obtained before starting data collection.

A total of eight students from universities in the Netherlands, Germany and Finland with a mean age of 21,63 (range 20-23) were interviewed. 75% of participants identified as

female and 25% as male. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in discussing the data (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participant characteristics*

<b>Participant's pseudonym</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Social media platforms</b>
Hannah	22	Female	Italian	Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, BeReal
Sophia	22	Female	German	Instagram, TikTok
Anne	22	Female	German	Instagram
Lara	21	Female	Dutch	Instagram, TikTok, Twitter ("X"), Discord
Christoph	23	Male	German	Instagram
Simon	22	Male	German	Instagram, Reddit
Clara	21	Female	German	Instagram, Facebook
Greta	20	Female	Dutch	Instagram, Snapchat

**Materials**

During the interview, a quiet room was utilized as a neutral setting and for the online interviews, the platform Zoom was used. All interviews were recorded with audio recorders provided by the BMS lab. In the process of coding, the program atlas.ti was utilized to help identify common themes and sub themes among the codes.

**Procedure**

Before the study, written informed consent was given. Two face-to-face and six online semi-structured interviews were conducted. These were considered as the most appropriate method to assess individual and potentially sensitive experiences about social media use and social capital. For the purpose of transcription, interviews were recorded. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes for each participant. Open-ended questions were used, e.g. “How does your social network look like?” or “What were your experiences with meeting people online?” (see Appendix A). The interview schedule was structured into three sub themes; Personality, Social network and support and Social media (see Appendix A). All of these themes were informed by prior research to avoid leading questions or bias. The theme of personality was used as an exploratory theme to get a general idea about their personality and lifestyle, but not deemed relevant based on the identified codes. The second and third theme blocks intended to assess experiences regarding social capital and social capital in the context of social media. Participants were debriefed and thanked for their time at the end of the study.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were recorded with audio recorders and transcribed verbatim. For coding, the six-step approach of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. The process included a first familiarization by reading through the interviews and identifying common links and themes with the help of the program atlas.ti. These themes were then clustered into more general themes, which were again reviewed for the purpose of accuracy later. If needed, labels for themes or codes were adjusted before the final results were identified. The four identified main themes are namely social media, social network, experiences regarding social capital on social media and suggestions for social media. Coding was conducted by a single researcher.

## Results

Four themes and sub themes were identified during the coding process based on relevancy. The main themes, the sub themes, and the codes within that sub theme can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Themes, sub themes & codes interviews*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>	<b>Codes</b>
<b>Social media</b>	Engagement type	Doom-scrolling
		Texting friends
		Sharing media
		Connect with acquaintances
		Photo storage (Snapchat)
		Tool to start conversation
	Coping mechanism	Comfort
		World passing by
		Doom-scrolling
		Echo chamber
	Impact on friendships	Social comparison
		Keeping contact
		Friends on phone
Low energy activity		
Be up to date		
Feelings	Be left out	

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		Connected
		Fake perfection
		Boredom
		Low effort way of sharing
<b>Social network</b>	Ways of meeting	Meeting online
		Meeting in person
	Experiences on online friendships	Friends with same interests
		Friends in new city
		Friends from other countries
		Romantic context
	Feelings	Feeling left out
		Supported
		Uncertain
		Trusting
		Inconveniencing
<b>Experiences regarding social capital on social media</b>	Positive	Feeling of belonging
		Expand world views
		(Emotional) safety
		Quick & easy tool
		Find like-minded community
		Crutch real life friends
		Finding love
	Negative	Anonymity

		Lack of consequences	
		Online persona	
		High inhibition threshold	
		Social comparison	
		Emphasis on loneliness	
		Lack of depth	
		Mismatch expectations	
<b>Suggestions on social media</b>	Restriction	Banning filters	
		Banning like count	
		Friends exclusive discovery page	
		New features	Prompts
			Connection tool under posts
			New text-based platform

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## **Social media**

### *Engagement type*

Engagement type describes the way participants chose to interact with the social media platform. These interactions can e.g. include passive scrolling or communicating with friends. All participants reported using social media to scroll through content for hours continuously. TikTok and Instagram were named especially often as platforms being used for this purpose. Sharing media and texting with friends were also mentioned by all participants: “What always works is sending videos or memes, I also have specific groups for it. Otherwise infos, photos, videos, audios” (Anne, 2024). Other engagement types that were

described were connecting with acquaintances, e.g. Hannah (2024) reported that “It’s usually the first thing I ask, like maybe in a social setting at a party or whatever to get someone’s contact information”, indicating that communication through one’s social media profile offers a more distant option of communication. Two participants mentioned using Snapchat for its photo memory function as well. Another code mentioned was using social media as a tool to start conversation with others, e.g. “When I know social media is my only contact option with this person and I see that someone posted a story I think “Oh I haven’t talked to this person in a while, I could just answer their story” (Christoph, 2024). Christoph (2024) described that on social media it does not feel as “weird” as texting people on WhatsApp unprompted because on Instagram there is always some form of context or media to build a conversation on.

### *Coping mechanism*

Coping mechanism describes participants’ perceptions on how content they are with social media as a tool to cope with uncomfortable emotions compared to other tools they use. When it comes to specific opinions, many participants mentioned getting into doom-scrolling and a feeling “[...] that the world somehow passes you by and you just sit there alone in your room” (Anne, 2024). Many participants reported that social media can feel like an echo chamber and especially when already feeling bad, increase the focus or a lack of some kind. Christoph (2024) e.g. said “If you sometimes you know if you’re feeling bad about yourself, you just get into that doom and gloom of it all and you feed into that.” Social comparison was a common topic as well, both towards celebrities and peers. Some mentioned that it helps them as a distraction from the real world and they find comfort in following influencers that portray balanced images of life: “I definitely like personally follow some influencers that do talk about this kind of thing [real and negative parts of life] and the more realistic thing and that can be comforting” (Hannah, 2024).

### *Impact on friendship*

Impact on friendship identifies how social media seems to influence participants existing social relations based on their experiences. Common findings were that it helps to keep in contact and offer support to especially long distance friends: “I think with like the international friends, it's I guess the only way you really can keep in contact easily. So I think if I didn't use the social media, I don't think I would have the same level of friendship with them as before” (Greta, 2024). Additionally, it seemingly allows quick and easy access to life updates of one's social circle. Multiple participants noticed an “availability fallacy”, where they felt left out or jealous when they saw online that people they knew were hanging out without asking them. Anne e.g. found that “You might feel lonely or alone because you might have the feeling, if you tell yourself that maybe they won't think of you because they could have at least asked.” Lastly, one participant mentioned that her friends tend to be on their phone frequently when they meet due to social media, but that it can also be a good parallel activity when neither have enough energy left to talk.

### *Feelings*

Feelings here describe participants' feelings towards social media usage and effects after use in terms of feeling (dis-)connected to their social network. In terms of general feelings towards social media, many mentioned that it makes them “[...] feel globally more connected to [their] friends” (Christoph, 2024) and is an easy tool to share media you enjoy with friends. Another topics mentioned was fear of missing out, Hannah (2024) e.g. talked about how she lives in a country in which she is able to see Northern Lights frequently but out of boredom and fear of missing out spends her time on Instagram instead: “There's this amazing natural occurrence that, you know, you don't really get to see it. And I'm very lucky



to be in a place where I potentially see it every day, but you know, not always, but more likely than not to see it. And I just miss it because of what? A reel?.” Additionally, the high emphasis of only showing the positive sides of one’s life were mentioned and that an image of fake perfection often makes participants feel worse about their lives being boring.

## **Social network**

### *Way of meeting*

Ways of meeting entails the ways in which individuals first got in contact with their current social network. The most common ways of meeting were in person and included school, university or work. Other ways of meeting mentioned were through living together, i.e. family or roommates or an exchange. Sophia (2024) e.g. reports that “[she] tends to get to know people personally or through other friends.” Five participants also reported to have at least one experience with getting to know a person through social media.

### *Experiences with online friendships*

Experiences with online friendships is a theme describing participants’ opinions on how meaningful and relevant meeting others online is for their social network based on previous experiences. The most mentioned experience mentioned regarding meeting people online was as a way of seeking people that are like-minded. Whether similar personalities, interests or hobbies, multiple participants mentioned that they had good experiences. Lara (2024) mentioned that she used social media to seek out like-minded people: “It’s just the thought that people are out there were kind of like me. That really put my mind at ease back then.” Another type of person that was sought out is someone from a different country or cultural background to expand one’s horizon. When it comes to meeting online friends in real life, participants often reported that either relationships stayed on a superficial level, distance

was too big or that contact dissolved for another reason. Simon (2024) e.g. recalls bonding with a stranger through gaming: “I think this was a while ago, but when I played Minecraft on a server and built gaggy things which we then exchanged about what we created. This experience with this was that it rather stayed on a superficial level [...] because I did not have the urge to create a deeper relationship.” On another note, sometimes strangers met on social media can turn into real life connections, even though the process depends on e.g. compatibility. Sophia (2024), who uses the platform Bumble BFF to meet friends after moving to a new city, mentions “The one meeting is always really nice. But then there will be more meetings. That's where it fails a bit. Really like dating.”

Additionally, two participants said that they met their long-term partner through social media, while two others mentioned uncomfortable situations with men in a romantic context: “There was this guy on there and we kind of knew each other and send each other memes and one of my friends friend ended up getting interested in me a lot. That was a very awkward situation for me because I did not want to advance the relationship and he couldn't be direct about. The expectations were not matched” (Lara, 2024).

### *Feelings*

Feelings describe feelings regarding participants' current main social network, that they identified in the interviews before (see Appendix A). Overall, participants were content with their social support system and felt trusting and supported: “I have my close friends and they're there for me” (Clara, 2024).

Some mentioned feeling like they are inconveniencing their social support system for significantly relying on a few single people: “I feel a bit sorry for them because I think they're a bit overwhelmed by having become my main contact center” (Sophia, 2024) or are

frequently unsure about reactions from more recently added members to their social support system.

### **Experiences regarding social capital on social media**

#### *Positive*

Positive experiences regarding social capital on social media entailed all reportings that participant had to share on meaningful opportunities and encounters to increase one's social capital. Codes include first-hand experiences only to base findings on real experiences as opposed to theories. In general, as positive aspects, a feeling of belonging and finding a community were mentioned by multiple participants. Sophia (2024) e.g. found that "I just downloaded Bumble BFF. And every time I feel like I'm a little lonely, I just meet someone online to go to a museum or whatever. And that helps." Similarly, Lara (2024) mentioned having used social media as a crutch when there was a lack of friends in real life which she still remains close relationships with after years: "At the moment, I'd say I have two friends who I really consider my best friends, people who I talk to every day. It's a bit different, I'd say, because I met them online, right? And I've known one of them for almost 10 years and the other for 7 years." One commonly mentioned topic was that social media is an easy and quick way to share a piece of media and therefore create a firmer connection or insiders with a friend. Additionally, it was mentioned that talking to others online can help expand one's horizon since it helps to get out of one's bubble of people with similar experiences and backgrounds. One participant mentioned that he appreciates the emotional safety and distance that comes with social media, especially in dealing with complicated relationships: "I'd say it can make communication about certain topics easier. After a break-up with your girlfriend, it can be a good thing" (Simon, 2024). Lastly, as mentioned above, two participants found their

long-term partners on social media, therefore it is seemingly possible to find love through social media as well.

### *Negative*

Negative experiences regarding social capital describes barriers and negative encounters that hinder increasing one's social capital via social media. Codes are based on first-hand experienced only. When looking at perceived disadvantages regarding social capital, anonymity and lack of consequences were mentioned. Anne (2024) said that her first negative experiences online when she was 13 included "Weird experiences, you can imagine like weird men talking to you." In a similar vein, a lack of depth and the discrepancy between online and real life persona were mentioned. Another frequently mentioned code was social comparison. Simon (2024) described social media as "[...] sort of like a display window effect. You can watch other people live their lives from a safe distance." One participant reported that the inhibition threshold on social media is higher compared to real life, and therefore the process of getting to know someone is associated with more time and effort. Adding to this, social media seems to emphasize feelings of loneliness by showing alternative realities: "And then you notice "Oh, there is a big discrepancy between what they are doing and what is shown and what I am experiencing right now" and then I feel lonely and have the desire to go out as well" (Christoph, 2024). Lastly, a mismatch between expectations regarding the nature of one's friendship in person can create conflicts. Lara (2024) warns that "If you're looking for people like you, social media can be very helpful, but if you're looking for something very deep and close, you need to have realistic expectations and be clear from the start."

### **Suggestions for social media**

Suggestions for social media is a theme identifying how platforms could be redesigned in a way that participants feel more connected to their existing social network and increase their social capital if desired. As for suggestions, participants had multiple ideas, either regarding restricting current mechanisms or adding new features.

### *Restrictions*

Restrictions include codes that desire limitations or restrictive functions on social media in order to increase connection and social capital. In terms of limiting tools, it was suggested to ban filters in order to show realistic images of people and decrease the curation of unrealistic beauty standards. In a similar vein, a suggestion was to ban the like posts on pictures to decrease feelings based on how much like one's single post has. Christoph (23), who uses social media as an "address book", criticizes the amount of information on his explore page and says he wants to only see his friends' content: "I only want to see their stuff. On my for you page as well, I just want to see posts of people I know or of my friends."

### *New features*

New features entail all ideas participants suggested for new features on social media that help to connect with strangers or to better connect with one's social network. One idea was to add prompts between scrolling that forces one to connect with people or real life for a few minutes. Another idea was to add features to directly connect with people through shared interests. Sophia (2024) e.g. said "I don't really know how that would be possible, but for example no one would just write under an Instagram post, I don't know, great shoes, where did you get them? Let's go shopping or something. But if that were a thing, I would be a total fan." Lastly, a wish for a platform simply for communication purposes was mentioned: "Me

personally, I'm more comfortable expressing myself through a text rather than talking. So something like Twitter but less toxic (Lara, 2024).”

## **Discussion**

### **Main findings**

Young adults today spend a significant amount of their free time on social media and different hypotheses regarding the possible relationship between social media and social capital have been tested resulting in mixed results (e.g. Braghieri et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2019; Kraut et al., 2002). Therefore, this study explored how young adults socially benefit from social media through conducting and coding of semi-structured interviews. During the coding process four main themes were identified; namely social media, social network, experiences regarding social capital and suggestions for social media.

The first way students experienced social capital gain through using social media was through texting or sharing media with friends, which seemed to be almost equally relevant as scrolling through posts. Participants consistently reported using it as a tool for communication with already established relationships in real life, whether it be friends or acquaintances. Accordingly, similar to Valkenburg and Peter (2007) these results provide support for the rich-get richer hypothesis, since participants who already possess social capital, use it to add another layer of friendship.

Regarding negative effects, participants frequently mentioned social comparison to peers when using social media to cope, showing that while having an established network, curated idealized images can give socially rich individuals the illusion that they are not based on momentary images. Current research supports negative experiences with image curation of peers, since upward social comparison is related to a lower feeling of belonging compared to

downward comparisons (Kavaklı & Ünal, 2021). These findings possibly provide partial support for the rich-get-poorer hypothesis by Pouwels et al (2021).

When talking about the impact of social media on established friendships, results of this study seem to offer indications for two hypotheses. It seems to be easier to stay in contact and look for life updates for friends with whose dynamic has changed. Either friends moved or individuals met in a different life stages, however the common denominator is still a first contact in real life. These results again support the rich-get-richer hypothesis (Cheng et al., 2019). On the other hand, participants reported feeling left out because they feel like they are easily available to others as well, and offended when friends do not reach out. Both this perception, and the experience of friends being on their phone more in meetings for this reason, provides support for the rich-get-poorer hypothesis. Similar to the study of Pouwels et al. (2021), while participants acknowledged long term-benefits of connection, momentary short-term experiences of feeling lonely while seeing specific content were identified.

Comparing the aforementioned experiences to general feelings, people globally felt more connected to their friends through social media. When asked to explain their general feelings of friendship closeness, participants either reported that social media barely has an effect or offers an enjoyable experience to create new inside jokes and share media with established friends. These experiences support the rich-get-richer hypothesis as well (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

### **Social network**

While all participants mainly connected with people in real life, the majority having experienced at least one online connection suggest the possibilities of social media for social benefit.

Specific experiences with online friendships showed that most had positive experiences finding like-minded individuals based on proximity, hobbies, interests or personality traits. However, since relationships often stayed superficial or ended, the general tendency of perceptions again points towards the rich-get-richer hypothesis as socially rich individuals tend to use it more with their friends instead of extending their circle online in meaningful ways. These findings are supported by research by Fröding and Peterson (2012) that online friendship are not a meaningful replacement of in person relationships. When there is a perceived need to find friends, participants seemed to be more open and committed to strengthen relationships or meet up in real life. This assumption is in contrast with Cheng et al. (2019), whose study suggests that people with higher social capital acquire and use online resources more frequently.

Additionally, participants were generally content with the state with their in person social network and felt supported, implying no need to use additional effort to advance strictly online relationships into close relationships.

### **Experiences regarding social capital**

When talking about experiences regarding social capital, positive and negative arguments were both mentioned frequently. Interestingly, mostly similar individuals but also people with different backgrounds were sought out. Also, similar to prior research on online dating, the participants who met their partners reported being open for novelty and had multiple experiences with meeting friends online as well (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). However, many other participant expressed openness towards or experiences with meeting others online, therefore this exploration cannot give sufficient support for this claim.

Regarding negative experiences, differences in online personas or a lack of depth compared to real life contacts were pointed out as disadvantages. Next to that, a mismatch in



expectations and loneliness through seeing images were mentioned, which is supported by prior research by Cheng et al. (2019) which relates lower social capital online to feelings of loneliness.

Lastly, regarding suggestions for connection on social media, a wish to connect further with people could be identified. Based on the wish for a texting platform similar to but a “less toxic version of Twitter”, the platform X, formerly Twitter, seems to currently not be a light-hearted, enjoyable experience for connection in participants. Additionally, the wish to connect with strangers through posts, suggests that posts on Instagram are mainly consumed by an already established friend group as opposed to actively providing opportunities to connect with strangers. Therefore, participants’ suggestions imply further support for the current reality of a rich-get-richer effect (Kraut et al., 2002) and the urge to change this reality towards more mechanisms to connect with new individuals.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study offers many benefits, the first one being that exploring this topic through a qualitative approach extends present literature on the social capital hypotheses with university students from multiple countries. Since research until this point mostly included quantitative data or different age groups such as teenagers (e.g. Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), the aim of this study was to gain more extensive knowledge by interviewing young adults. By generating qualitative data, it was possible to assess individual perceptions and make meaningful contributions to research in how social media relates to their social capital.

However, this study has multiple limitations as well. Firstly, snowball sampling was used, which may influence results and disproportionately represent a subgroup of young adults using social media. Another limitation is the lack of information about participants’ general mental well-being status as issues in friendships can also be induced by bad mental health, e.g. by isolation or lack of energy that would be necessary for sustaining relationships

(Onia, 2022). Lastly, one researcher coded all interviews through an extensive familiarization and coding process, which may have led to bias as a coding process with multiple researchers may lead to different interpretations of the findings.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Lastly, while this study mentioned the rich-get-poorer hypothesis (Pouwels et al., 2021), this idea is still new and not explored thoroughly. For future research, researchers could look further into investigation of support for this hypothesis, especially longitudinally, since Pouwels et al. (2021) were only able to report a short-term effect. Regarding social comparison and loneliness, it is worth looking further into cause and effect. This study offers further support for the existence of a possible relationship, however more research is needed to offer more insight and support on which circumstances solidify this outcome. For example, research in the future may look more into the rich-get-poorer hypothesis or into the relationship between social capital and social media in the context of dating as research in this area is still scarce (Poley & Luo, 2012; Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017). With more insights, interventions for socially poor individuals could be designed, that may include social media or advice from socially rich individuals, to gain social capital. Lastly, researchers could use a different sample, e.g. non-students or individuals that are older, to investigate if a similar effect is present. To date, mostly adolescents and young adults have been researched, although a significant amount of older adults use social media as well (Faverio, 2022). It would be interesting to investigate different platforms, potential differences in age groups or intentions of using.

In conclusion, this study provides mostly support for the rich-get-richer hypothesis, meaning that most participants reported having a stable social network in person and use social media mainly to strengthen those relationships. These participants either did not have

an interest meeting new people through social media first or online relationships did not extend to meaningful friendships over time. However, there was limited support for the rich-get-poorer as three participants either met their long-term best friend or partner through social media. Similarly, there were some findings that indicate a poor-get-richer effect as well, as friends seemingly spend more time on social media during in person meet ups and most participants reported feeling disconnected, lonely or worse about their own life after watching their friends' content on social media which is why more research regarding all three hypotheses in the future is needed.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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## Appendix A. Interview schedule

### Opening + Personality

Hey, thank you for participating! How are you doing today?

- To start off, can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- How would you describe your personality?

What traits do you first think of? What is most obvious when someone first meet you and how? How would your friends or family describe you?

When we talk about personality, we often talk about the Extraversion-Introversion dimension.

How would you define these terms?

*Definition Extraversion-Introversion*

**these concepts exist on a scale, you may sort yourself in the middle/lean more towards one side**

- *Extraversion:*
  - *focus towards the outer world of people and things: outgoing, sociable, expressive*
  - *seek novelty and excitement & enjoy being the center of attention*
  - *thrive in social settings and feel energized by interacting with others: often seek out and enjoy group activities and may feel restless or isolated*
- *Introversion:*
  - *focus on private inner thoughts and feelings*
  - *more withdrawn, passive, thoughtful and preference to keep emotions private*
  - *feels more comfortable and energized in solitary or low-stimulus environments, often preferring one-on-one or small-group interactions*
  - *finds excessive social interactions draining*

- Where would you sort yourself on this scale and why?

Do you e.g. gain energy from alone time or spending time with friends? How does this look like in real life/on social media?

- How do you usually approach people you do not know?

Is it difficult/easy? Do you have special strategies or tools? Can you give me a recent example?

Sometimes we all feel uncomfortable in social situations, no matter how confident we are.

- How do you usually cope with feeling uncomfortable in social situations?

Does it happen often? Do you e.g. avoid social situations or have strategies?

### **Social network & support**

When talking about relationships, we sometimes use the term social support. What do you think social support is?

*Definition social support: Social support: the help or comfort of your social network from your social network, for example family members, friends, neighbors, religious institutions, colleagues, caregivers, or support groups.*

*→ they help you with any needs or things that stress you (examples like practical help like chores, money, emotional support and comfort etc.)*

- How does your social support system look like?

What people? (Personality) How did you meet? How do you feel about this network?

- How do you usually spend your time together?

Do you e.g. try new things together, have standard activities, meet new people often/stay in the same circles? Give me examples

We all feel lonely sometimes, despite the strongest social support system.

- How often do you feel that way?

- What are your usual coping mechanisms?

Give me examples and how you feel about them (e.g. do they work)

- In your opinion, what is the connection between feeling lonely and social media?
- Why do you think it is a good/bad coping mechanism?

### **Social media & hypotheses**

- Which apps do you use and how?

What does the use look like? How do you feel about these apps? Do you share a lot/passively scroll...?

- How do you use it with friends?
- What influence does it have on your friendship?

Does it e.g. help to communicate more regularly, share things you like, do you feel more connected/disconnected generally?

- What is your experience like with meeting people online?

How did it happen? How is your relationship? Did it extend your social circle in a meaningful way?

- What is your opinion on meeting people online?

Why it is a good/bad method compared to meeting people online? Can it be helpful and for whom?

- What would you change about social media to feel more connected to your social network?

Give examples if possible

### **Closing**

These were all the questions I had for you. Do you still have any questions or want to add something?

Thank you so much for participating, you helped me a lot. Feel free to send me an e-mail if any questions come up.

Have a good day!