

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA ON YOUNG ADULT DEVELOPMENT

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation [Proposal] Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

[July 2024]

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## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

**Abstract**

The study examines from a Christian worldview how free will, regarded as God's greatest gift, is now being shaped by human influence. New treatment methods become essential to adapt to the media-changing world and help with developmental delays. The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory lite study was to explore Internet media's influence on young adults in Quebec, Canada. Data on Internet media demographics, social behavior, identity, influence, emotional self-regulation, and moral decision-making were collected by conducting twelve semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with young adults in Quebec. The responses were coded into six primary themes, with an intercoder conducting a cross-verification to enhance the validity of the coding process. The interviews revolved around the three research questions on how the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use relate to social behavior, identity, and self-regulation developmental delays. Participants were 18 to 32 years old, with no struggles with identity, previous diagnosis, or trauma. The results showed that all twelve participants were heavy media users and eleven of them used it for entertainment. Some results supported it while others refuted previous research on media influence on development. The implications of the data closed the gap regarding the extent Internet media influences social (identity and social behavior) and socio-emotional (self-regulation of emotions) development, by adding qualitative data to quantitative numbers. Understanding these relationships and their signs will better prepare those in a helping role (counselors, therapists, and all caregivers) to monitor and intervene.

*Keywords:* Internet media, development, social, influence, young adults

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

### **Dedication**

To my son who gave up his time while I did my homework, my two stepdaughters who encouraged me, and my mom who helped in so many ways. I can never thank you all enough. You helped me achieve my dream of completing my Ph. D. and kept me inspired to show that it is never too late.

Thank you for your help, and I love you all more than you can imagine!

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# INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Media has been influencing society since its existence. This influence has impacted development in many facets, with children having lifelong attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs modified by what they see in the media (Eide, 2020). This research focuses on the media's influence on social and socio-emotional development. In understanding media, it is important to identify all its different channels and roles.

Overall, many studies have shown links between media and developmental issues. An average American adult can consume up to nine hours of media a day, showing media's potential to influence what viewers think of themselves, others, and the world; molding a culture, including a religious culture (Eide, 2020). Social media has expanded since its role in the 2008 presidential campaign to elect President Obama (Kim & Lee, 2021). A survey using probability sampling on U.S. adults and a regression model showed the growth of social media and its impact on the presidential election. It was used as a tool to initiate political action, the more social media was used for information, the increased participation in politics and greater voter turnout. With the COVID-19 pandemic, media has increased in individuals' lives and the negative relationship it seemingly generates (Sewall et al., 2022).

### **Background**

There are positive relationships with media, demonstrated through self-reports on well-being, which can be seen in prosocial behavior and online social interactions to increase support and facilitate social communications for those struggling with social and/or behavioral issues (ex. social anxiety, autism, and ADHD) (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021; Dodemaide et al., 2019; Esobar-Viera et al., 2020). It is also a useful tool in recruiting minority groups (such as

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transgender) for research purposes in helping to be more inclusive and finding solutions/benefits for all (Salk et al., 2020). An online world also allows for exploring identity (Allen et al., 2021).

### **Development**

With access to media starting at an early age, its relationship with development has been frequently reinforced by the age of young adulthood (Bagot et al., 2022; Steele et al., 2023; Ybarra et al., 2022). Exposure to violence from a young age has been linked to violent behaviors in adults with a 0.70 positive correlation between frequency and level of violence with violent behaviors later in life (Vink et al., 2020). They also showed increased desensitization, increased pain tolerance, and higher scoring on the fearlessness of death test (Fortsch et al., 2021). A longitudinal study (three evaluations with five-year intervals) by Ybarra et al. (2022) showed self-reports of Japanese gamers demonstrating increased violent behavior after playing for six months. In addition to this, entertainment viewing of any type has been shown to play a role in reducing self-regulation, internalizing disorders, and depression (Domoff et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2019; Ra et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2022). Children spend more time with media than their parents, giving the example of the displacement theory. These studies show the multiple relationships with both social (acquiring social skills, norms, and behaviors) and socio-emotional (emotional competencies, identity, and managing emotions in a social context) development (Domoff et al., 2019; Fortsch et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2022; Vink et al., 2020; Ybarra et al., 2022). Both of which were the focus of the current research.

Social and socio-emotional development begins with identity development and the formation of self to know where one stands with others (Juvonen et al., 2019). Attachment to digital avatars is a form of identity development. When used to avoid real-world issues, the attachment to a digital identity grows stronger, and the separation from reality and fantasy

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becomes ambiguous (Qi et al., 2023). When virtual identity strengthens, it becomes part of the self-concept and increases the risk of addiction by blurring the lines between the self-discrepancy theory (a view of one's perception of their self as the actual, ideal, and the ought self). Conflict within who one is, or who one wants or should be can compromise the development of an actual self. Internet gamers fulfill their sense of accomplishment through the progression of their avatar, and engaging in self-discovery through this avatar transforms the player's perspective from the third to the first-person experience (Gray, 2018; Rapp, 2022). From this detachment, identities are discovered in online communities (Allen et al., 2021). Also, by having the extended time to think over and edit a message, one lends themselves to multiple self-presentation strategies (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015).

Qi et al. (2023) discovered a link between low cognitive skill levels and association with an avatar. Data demonstrated that children with underdeveloped social skills due to a lack of attachment and parental interactions are left alone to learn these skills through media and will struggle to communicate in the real world (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). An absence of these social skills will lead to issues in young adults developing their independence, autonomy, and growing relationships.

Social development depends on attachment theory, where expectations of creating and maintaining relationships are formed (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Players often use the games for socializing, boredom, loneliness, mood stabilizers for depression, and escapism as determined by previous research (Banyai et al., 2019; Bonny & Castaneda, 2022; Haagsma et al., 2013). Online video game players can relieve their stress and increase feelings of social belonging, as well as general well-being (Pavlopoulou et al., 2022).

### **Media Influence**

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Video games, like all sources of Internet distractions (ex., pornography, gambling, and social media use), come with the danger of addiction. Even though Proverbs 21:17 “He who loves pleasure will suffer want; he who loves wine and perfume will not be rich” (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995) warns us against liking something too much. Video games are the most addictive and largest distractor for young adults as they create a digital world of escape (Goh et al., 2019; Greenfield, 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the APA have both added video gaming addiction as a disorder in their respective manuals (International Classification of Disease – ICD-11 and the DSM-5) (Dong & Pontenza, 2022; Vaccaro et al., 2019). Most addictive disorders share the same traits and can all hinder development (Dong & Pontenza, 2022; Vaccaro & Potenza, 2019). The social cognitive theory mentions many of these traits and how they can lead to depression and even suicide (Greenfield, 2022; Mamun & Griffiths, 2020; Twenge et al., 2018).

A study by Navarro (2021) showed that online video games, like Fortnite, socialize and teach prosocial behaviors. In general, the online world is seen to be comforting by offering a sense of closeness, belonging, security, and a method to deal with social difficulties (e.g. Autism, social anxiety, and attachment issues) (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Vizard et al., 2022). Even political views are developed from the media, as most political knowledge is learned from the different forms of media (Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). The media also manipulates Self-regulation and social development (Domoff et al., 2019; Vink et al., 2020).

The influence of Western media is seen around the globe, as pointed out in a study by Izdorczyk et al. (2022). Gay men’s perceived pressure and their self-esteem react to the sociocultural standards set by the media. There is a correlation between increased Internet media and internalizing disorders and depression. Symptoms went as far as anxiety and suicidal

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ideations or attempts (Bettmann et al., 2020; Robertson et al., 2022). Even with a still photograph, one can make assumptions based on personal stereotypes and put in motion particular narratives in the media (Manusov & Compton, 2023).

Media and stereotypes have long been associated with each other. Research shows the history of how the media has manipulated the influence of these stereotypes and perpetuated separation and division between “us” and “them” - the in-group and the out-group (Cheng & Yorgenson, 2022; Dogan et al., 2021; Harriger et al., 2021; Juvonen et al., 2019). As mentioned in the social identity theory (SIT), this helps to increase self-esteem (Gibson & Hester, 2023).

### **Biblical View**

Free will was the Lord’s greatest gift to us, practiced from the beginning. He sent Adam and Eve to the Garden of Eden, “The LORD God gave man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995, Genesis 2:16-17*). Humanity had a choice since creation, and free will is still a fundamental concept in society today and a defining attribute of humanity (Genschow et al., 2021). Free will is being challenged by the manipulations of media.

The belief that free will is a false ideation exists and has been shared by the media (Brass et al., 2019). Research by Brass et al. (2019) has shown that whether one believes in free will or not, their life is affected by this debate, as social behavior by the majority can have a passive effect on one’s environment. It was discovered through the review of Brass et al. (2019) on over three decades of Libet task research that the idea that the brain decides our behavior was misinterpreted by the decision-making process itself.

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With free will comes free speech, and social media (namely Twitter) is said to be the ultimate platform for promoting free speech (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Research has even debated that social media networks must fight for and grow free speech. The discussion is rooted in protecting users while at the same time protecting free speech. For example, political views must be shared but hate speech must be banned. Although not all forms of media share this view, a study seen by Cheng and Yorgason (2022) discussed how media elites do not often share the same level of religiosity as the general public and, therefore, favor politics over religion when making a stance. Children's holiday specials in the media are actively deviating from blatant portrayals of religious acts and symbols to a more generalized and commercialized secular viewpoint of Christmas (Eide, 2020). These specials give the example of how an American Christmas revolves around consumer capitalism as a religion where Jesus is no longer the focus as Santa Claus replaces Christ. The underlying message in these specials is that without Santa and the perfect gift or perfect idolized and commercialized version, there would be no Christmas. Also, when sex is higher on one's list of priorities, there is less focus on religion (Moon, 2021). With just these few examples, a connection is seen with media separating itself from religion and promoting sex, therefore creating a clear division. The media has removed most forms of religion from its messages and only uses it as another divider between citizens. From this, a debate among Christians is still not settled as to whether Christianity should be involved with the mainstream media (Sheldon, 2020).

Regarding Christianity and media, media has a lasting effect on social beliefs as seen with the mass attention given to the scandals within the Catholic church and priests (Plante, 2020). There was even a movie made about these events, and it won an Academy Award. The highlighted scandals have left the general public with the sentiment that pedophilia is running

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rampant in the church and is still a major concern for society (these events happen less frequently in church than with teachers), with the church doing little to change it, but the facts are much the opposite as stated in the research by Plante (2020). Social development is severely affected by media headlines as it is dependent on the environment. These misinterpretations open the door to biases with ingroup, and echo chambers (reporting second-hand news) judgments that lead to divisions (Habib et al., 2020).

Media has proven itself to be a consequence of the Fall in the Grand Narrative that human civilization has taken. News coverage is wildly known for being biased, inaccurate, or outright lies to the extent that websites exist as fact-checkers to challenge what we are being told as the truth (Chiu & Oh, 2022). Media ethics are further questioned when video game designers, in collaboration with psychologists, actively create games that prolong engagement (Rapp, 2022). Addiction is being fed by these developers who depend on it.

Many aspects of religion are found in the media. Trust is a major one and is often lost in the spiral of silence (no public discussion), and from this, citizens with unpopular opinions regarding religion lose out to the media (Alkazemi, 2019). Presidents and political candidates even use the media to express their faith (whether to express their beliefs or attract more voters, as they often use general terms from the Bible and speak of a creator). Due to the growth and spread of media, the communication and culture of religion were altered, and religious followers had to adjust to online discussion boards and broadcasting of Mass (for those unable to make it to the church physically and during the pandemic). With religion being digitalized to media, it has created more polarizations where one does not have to expose oneself to any religious message other than their own belief.

### **Problem Statement**

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Media content has been on the rise since the birth of the Internet with an increasing amount of availability (Kim, 2021). This content, especially with social media, is not always researched or censored (Chiu & Oh, 2022). Additionally, access begins at earlier ages (Ybarra et al., 2022) with media being used as a virtual babysitter. Early exposure to media brings about adults who were raised in part in a digital world and are spending more time with media (Fortsch et al., 2021; Robertson et al., 2022). Internet media brings a new aspect to free speech providing a platform for all to give their opinions. This platform is dangerous in many ways as opinions are often one-sided and may stem from hate or discrimination with an unwillingness to hear opposing thoughts (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Internet media also allows users and online gamers to escape their emotions (Domoff et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2023; Vink et al., 2020). As opinions can be openly shared among users, the difference between facts and opinions must be acknowledged to ensure young minds do not fall prey to believing all of what they read without research. Also, escaping emotions instead of healthily processing them can cause developmental issues (Goh et al., 2019; Greenfield, 2022). Social and socio-emotional development of young minds, regarding identity and social behavior as well as self-regulation of emotions, is at risk of social normalizing from echoing their decision-making process based on media such as “reality” TV (that is significantly edited and sends a desired message) (Burt, 2018) and developmental delays in coping with emotions. Generations have lifelong changes in their social and socio-emotional development due to stereotypes and discrimination that are strengthened through the media, and news coverage that is untrustworthy (Alkazemi, 2019; Bell, 2019; Chiu & Oh, 2022; Diaz et al., 2022; Dogan et al., 2021; Eide, 2020; Huang & Chang, 2020; Juvonen et al., 2019; Plante, 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021; Vink et al., 2020).

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Direct data from college students and their media use (reasoning for use, frequency, duration) compared with heavy and moderate media users will shorten the gap in the literature. The study aims to close the gap regarding the extent Internet media influences social (identity and social behavior) and socio-emotional (self-regulation of emotions) development. Knowing what these relationships are and what to look for (signs and behaviors) will better prepare those in a helping position (teachers, counselors, therapists, and all caregivers) to monitor and intervene (Dong & Pontenza, 2022; Gonga et al., 2019; Koehler et al., 2023).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory lite study was to explore Internet media's influence on young adults in Quebec, Canada. At this research stage, traditional and social media influence on social and socio-emotional development was generally defined as Internet media influence.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding social behavior developmental delays?

RQ 2: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding identity developmental delays?

RQ 3: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding self-regulation of emotional developmental delays?

### **Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

The study assumes that all the participants use Internet media to some degree. Also, the study only covers social and socio-emotional development as each has multiple aspects. With the

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addition of other forms of development or a larger age group or life span, information will be abundant and will dilute the study's validity to multiple variables. It was assumed that the participants would answer the interview questions honestly and to the best of their ability.

Although the study's objective was to reduce the gap in data for Internet media influence, there are a few limitations to point out. First, all media types (ex. social, podcasts, Internet gaming, streaming) were viewed and considered.

A second limitation was that physiological testing or neuro-scanning was not done. These tests would show biological reactions and brain pathways (through fMRI imaging) of thought processes before and after Internet media consumption. This testing method also gives exact data that is not dependent on self-reporting. The interview questions left room for explanation, but the participants' views on their reasoning for use and their recall of general Internet media use may not be accurate due to false memories or uncertainty. Validity is jeopardized through recall.

Third was that there were multiple forms of development to identify, and Internet media can influence them all. As media can have at minimum, an indirect social relationship with everyone (media at large influences political votes, and this affects everyone, even if one actively avoids media), it was selected along with social and socio-emotional developmental outcomes as a measurement. However, with biological and physiological testing through fMRI and heart rate measurements, the decision-making process could be traced, and exact data extracted. This data could also be generalized as it is not subjective. Blood flow is mapped as it activates the different regions of the brain.

The sample was a foundation for introduction to data regarding the extent Internet media influences social and socio-emotional development. Due to the similarities, the data cannot be globalized as it is based on mainly White young adults from Quebec, Canada.

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Finally, there were possible previous social issues that led to the resulting overconsumption of Internet media as well. For instance, abuse, bullying, or other forms of possible trauma the participant could have experienced are all possibilities for frequency, duration, and reason to use Internet media. The interview questions attempted to account for these extraneous variables and separate from participants with no such previous circumstances but were limited in their capacities.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

The overall comprehension of the study is based on the concept of Media Effect, which considers all the multiple theories and concepts that address individual aspects of Internet media's influence on social and socio-emotional development. For instance, dual process theory (Nadurak, 2023) and organismic integration theory (OIT) (Sheldon & Titova, 2023) address the thought process behind decision-making. Theories like basic psychological needs (BPN) (Sheldon & Titova, 2023) and cognitive evaluation theory (Hsu, 2022) attempt to explain the needs behind a decision and how choices are made to satisfy needs. In terms of message interpretation, feelings as information theory (FIT) (Zhou et al., 2023) and differential susceptibility to media effect model (Tuck et al., 2023) demonstrate how they are interpreted based on one's current mood. Persuasion is looked at through the persuasion theory (Chen et al., 2022), and a section of the self-determination theory (Benita, 2020) reflects on emotional regulation. For the biblical concerns of the study, cognitive authority (Sun et al., 2023) and social acceptance theory (Olan et al., 2022) illustrate how opinions of news and information can be spread by multiple users even when the news is fake or unsourced and causes divisions in society. Finally, both the theory of motivated free will (Clark & Shariff, 2021) and a separate section of the SDT (Sheldon & Goffredi, 2021) expound on free will.

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To give a more detailed view of these theories, they will be listed in more depth. The explanation of each of these theories demonstrated their pertinence on each main topic of the study as well as the research questions. The following theories can be defined as the singular media effect understanding. They all contribute to media's different effects on development through need satisfying, choice/decision-making, behavior and emotional regulation, fitting in and division, and cognitive understanding.

**Dual process theory** explains to what extent and how an individual mentally reacts to a message carries more weight in determining persuasion than the actual content of the message (Nadurak, 2023).

**Organismic integration theory (OIT)** examines the motivations behind people's actions and places these motivations on a continuum that ranges from highly controlled or non-autonomous reasons to highly self-determined or autonomous reasons (Sheldon & Titova, 2023).

**Basic psychological needs (BPN)** state that every human has developed a collection of fundamental psychological needs that enhance one's health and overall well-being (Sheldon & Titova, 2023).

**Cognitive evaluation theory** suggests that individuals possess fundamental psychological needs, specifically competence, autonomy, and relatedness when engaging in specific tasks (Hsu, 2022). When these needs are met, it leads to intrinsic motivation and increased satisfaction, ultimately enhancing their level of involvement and enjoyment.

**Cognitive authority** indicates that people's assessment of the quality of online information is influenced by factors such as precision, dependability, comprehensiveness, and authenticity (Sun et al., 2023).

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**Social acceptance theory** draws from relevant information on fake news, social media, and the degree of societal acceptance, the theory considers the impact of these three elements (Olan et al., 2022). The information from these three components shows the importance of each connection in managing the dissemination of fake news. Deceptive information can have enduring consequences on various aspects of development. Trusting in false beliefs and imitating deceptive behaviors can significantly influence identity formation, especially among developing individuals.

**Feelings as information theory (FIT)** highlights the role of personal emotions in shaping how information is perceived, leading to different interpretations of the same message depending on an individual's emotional state (Zhou et al., 2023). The FIT theory illustrates how media messages can become distorted and perpetuated within echo chambers. This theory has strong ties to the development of social behavior since emotions influence behaviors, and internet media can have a significant impact in this regard.

**The differential susceptibility to media effect model** suggests that an individual's susceptibility to media persuasion is influenced by their emotional state (Tuck et al., 2023). The theory further asserts that emotional reactions to media content are a response to the viewer's mood during exposure.

**Persuasion theory** is a framework that deals with communication components and how they influence the development and reshaping of recipients' attitudes and behaviors (Chen et al., 2022). A persuasive message has the potential to trigger a shift in attitudes, which in turn can lead to changes in the behavior of the public. Essentially, persuasive messages seek to alter the perspective of the viewer/user, encouraging them to engage in behavior that aligns with the message.

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**Self-determination theory (SDT)** offers valuable perspectives on the study of emotion regulation by emphasizing autonomy (Benita, 2020). Consequently, this is proposed as a promising framework for examining emotion regulation mechanisms, as it demonstrates how these mechanisms facilitate individuals' psychological growth and the formation of a consistent self-identity.

**The theory of motivated free will** posits that some of our beliefs and attributions of free will are influenced by a desire to hold morally responsible those who commit transgressions (Clark & Shariff, 2021). This theory aligns with empirical observations and fits well within broader human evolution and cognitive reasoning explanations.

**SDT** demonstrates that when individuals experience a sense of freedom, their actions are more likely to align with the intended goals, leading to increased satisfaction for both them and others, and fostering creativity and personal development (Sheldon & Goffredi, 2021).

### Definition of Terms

The following is a list of definitions of terms that were used in this study.

**Cingulate cortex** – The cingulate cortex is a large region within the limbic system that spans across the corpus callosum and includes both its anterior and posterior segments (Wang et al., 2022).

**Deontological** – This is a personal assumption that to hurt someone else is always wrong, no matter the circumstance (Wang et al., 2021).

**Dorsolateral prefrontal cortex** – Dorsolateral prefrontal cortex consists of the heteromodal cortex, which is the area that receives input from various sensory and multimodal regions, and it connects with the occipital, temporal, and parietal lobes, along with sensorimotor cortices through neural projections (Wang et al., 2022).

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**Emotional regulation** – Emotional regulation is a multifaceted and intricate process involving biological, social, behavioral, conscious, and unconscious cognitive processes, it stands as a crucial element for individuals' well-being, emotional-social adaptation, and physical and psychological health (Guclu et al., 2022).

**Fake news** – Fake news refers to information that is not subjected to scrutiny but possesses an appearance of credibility and professionalism, making it difficult for individuals to differentiate it from genuine news (Olan et al., 2022).

**Free will** – Free will is defined as the uniquely human aspect of our existence that relies on our perception of each other as independent individuals with the capacity for making free choices (Genshaw et al., 2023).

**Influence** – Influence is the susceptibility to change opinions, attitudes, and/or behaviors to the suggestions of others (Laursen & Faur, 2022).

**Infodemics** – Infodemics are defined as situations marked by the unregulated proliferation of information, including a plethora of unreliable, counterfeit, deceptive, and unconfirmed data (Ferrara et al., 2020).

**Middle frontal gyrus** – The middle frontal gyrus is a broad convolution situated between the superior and inferior frontal sulci, positioned anteriorly to the precentral gyrus (Wang et al., 2022).

**Online/Internet gaming** – Online/Internet gaming refers to people who opt to participate in various categories of team-oriented video games online. The available gaming choices enable players to tailor their gaming experience according to their preferences (Bonny & Castaneda, 2022).

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**Persuasion** – Persuasion is defined as the components of communication and how they contribute to shaping and reshaping the attitudes and actions of recipients (Chen et al., 2022).

**Precuneus** – the precuneus forms the inner part of the superior parietal lobe and serves as a significant part of the posteromedial cortex, which also encompasses the posterior cingulate cortex and the default mode network (Wang et al., 2022).

**Prosocial behavior** – Prosocial behavior is interpersonal abilities indicating selflessness and striving to benefit others (Oliver et al., 2021).

**Social acceptance** – Social acceptance is determined by social position in a peer group (van der Wilt, 2023).

**Social media** – Social media refers to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and all online platforms for sharing information (Charron & Annoni, 2021).

**Social value** – Is an assessment and distribution of rewards for oneself and others (Doppelhofer et al., 2021).

**Supramarginal gyrus** – Supramarginal gyrus refers to the convolution encircling the termination of the Sylvian fissure, the angular gyrus, and occasionally the cortex in between (Wang et al., 2022).

**Traditional media** – Traditional media is defined as TV, Newspaper, and radio (Charron & Annoni, 2021).

**Utilitarian** – This is a view that it is acceptable to hurt another, as long as the final result has a beneficial effect (Wang et al., 2021).

### Significance of the Study

The results from the study are a foundation for research on Internet media influence. It is already known that the media influences society, but it is not fully understood to what extent.

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Based on current research, the relationship this influence has with social and socio-emotional development is not clear. Information obtained from the participants revealed the reactions and perceptions of young adults, who are the primary consumers of Internet media, regarding what they find socially acceptable. Internet media has an important influence on society, and the study shed light on the importance of media knowledge and awareness.

Findings on Internet media selection and reasoning for this will contribute to research. The goal was to understand how, and to what degree, is the average Internet user influenced and guided in a certain direction. The aim of the qualitative data, through interviews, is to give direct insight into the reasoning for media selection. This method will also permit the discovery of intentional use, frequency, duration, media type chosen based on feelings at the time of selection, and so much more. There is little qualitative data in current research; getting this firsthand will strengthen the already discovered number. It will also allow verifying if the quantitative numbers match with the qualitative data.

The information in current literature seldom focuses on development. When reviewed, development is looked at as a whole. As such, research has given a picture of the situation with little guidance on how to help. It is still debated if media is used too much or even if there is such a thing as too much but having tools to recognize addiction or developmental delays and to help treat them is needed, nonetheless (Ferguson et al., 2022; Hunt et al., 2021; Lewis & Sznitman, 2022; Mahon & Hevey, 2021).

The added information from this research area will benefit better treatment practices. Internet media can cause different types of developmental delays in various regions as well as cause addiction. Awareness of the issues Internet media can cause and recognizing the signs of these issues will help in prevention and treatment. The WHO and DSM-5 have recognized these

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issues, and additional data on how they affect social and socio-emotional development, as well as how they are acquired in the first place will help in matching treatment methods.

### Summary

Media is a main factor in many people's lives, but its effects are not always known. Developmental delays and addiction are major issues that arise from it but often go unnoticed and/or undetected; therefore, no treatment is pursued. The influence of Internet media can affect society on a large scale as well, not solely individually. Politics is a leading area where the effects of the media are seen, which coincides with laws and regulations on a national scale for all to obey. This influence is only growing, as seen with the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are some benefits from media, such as it can help improve prosocial behavior, ease communication, aid in overcoming obstacles, and exploration of the self (Das-Friebel et al., 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019; L'Engle et al., 2023; Shankleman et al., 2021; Teague & Shatte, 2021). However, its growth draws concern in terms of frequency, duration, accessibility, and the age of introduction, creating the necessity to understand it more. There is an attraction to different media channels and a better understanding of why users turn to a particular one (including the length it is used and the need they are fulfilling while using it) will increase treatment methods.

Social development, in the form of behavior and identity, is heavily impacted by the media. The same is true for socio-emotional development. The next generation is being born into a world where social media will be a part of their lives from birth, and a new digital world will inevitably change their development. Social activism, communication, socializing, relationships, self-regulation, information gathering, and the like are all spheres in which Internet media has altered drastically. With two-way communication, users take on an active role and can post their

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feedback often directed by biases and stereotypes. The question of God's gift of free will still being free is debatable due to the persuasion of Internet media. The divisions it has caused between Church and state, and within society through discrimination and stereotypes, are leading culture away from Scripture and towards secular acceptance. Chapter 2 will review previous research that will demonstrate these divisions and free will and how it has been impacted. There will also be a review of works on media influence and development.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

**Overview**

Internet media has influenced development since its existence by altering lifelong attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Eide, 2020). In current society, media is commonly understood to be either traditional (TV, radio, and newspapers) or social media (ex. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) (Charron & Annoni, 2021). This current study has operationally defined media as Internet media (social media, as it has taken on most of the similar roles of traditional media, information/communication/ entertainment, and Internet gaming). The creation of social media brought about a whole new world and set of opportunities and issues. Throughout this research are examples of the media's influence on society, with a focus on development. The impact on different developmental significance will be discussed through previous research.

The vast majority of the studies referenced in the current literature use self-reporting surveys to identify participants' media use (frequency, type, duration, reason for use, and any other link to media use), which reflects a review of research in the field. There was a lack in previous studies that did not account for potential individual differences that may already be present in the participants, such as social anxiety that would lead to an additional desire to socialize from a distance or trauma from abuse that would lead to an added effort to escape (Barbaro, 2020; Carpendale et al., 2023; Cuyvers et al., 2020; Falla et al., 2023; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Nikken, 2019). For example, these preexisting factors, previous diagnoses, trauma, and family situations may lead to different media uses. The beginning of the participant interviews in the current study attempted to account for these to ensure a similar data pool free of these extraneous variables.

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Chapter 2 will discuss previous research on media influence through “fake news,” Internet gaming, marketing’s message, persuasion/influence, and politics. These mediums of consuming media will be evaluated through their effect on the social and socio-emotional development of college students. Following this would be evaluating these topics through a Christian worldview. There will be a discussion on understanding free will and how it is being jeopardized. The final major point of interest is the division caused by the media between itself and religion, church and state, and between members of society. This research aims not to discover if media influences development but to determine how much it does so. Also, to add qualitative data to the quantitative research. Statistics are known and show the numbers from previous quantitative data, but qualitative data is discussed, displaying how it is needed to reinforce these numbers.

### **Description of Search Strategy**

In the research of the literature and assessment of the current state of research on the influence of media, key terms were searched in the PsychINFO (APA PsyNet) database. Academic journals in the media field were first reviewed, and from here, the research expanded based on more key terms. This database was used to search for the following terms “media influence,” “media influence on development,” “gatekeepers of media,” “Internet gaming,” “benefits of media use,” “negatives of media use,” “online gaming,” “fake news,” “media and identity formation,” “media influence and marketing,” “media influence and politics” “media use statistics,” and “persuasion.” The results from these searches led to more specific topics from the list of available journals: the media effect on identity formation, the media effect on social behavior, how the media influences self-regulation of emotions, how media influences free will, and divisions created by media.

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Biblical research was first centered on Google searches for verses that pertained to influence, development, identity, and social behavior. These verses became the basis of article searches in the PsychINFO database. Peer-reviewed journal articles on free will and the division between media and religion were sourced for Biblical research. Many resources came from the Journal of Media and Religion. These searches gave multiple articles showing religious views on how media's influence plays a role in free will, division, and development.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Influence**

##### **Statistics**

With almost 4.66 billion active users on the Internet in January 2021 (which was 59.5% of the world's population) (Cronin, 2022), and 2.23 billion of those are on Facebook alone (Wilson & Stock, 2021), Internet media has a wide grasp and entails many factors. With this number of users, the amount of time spent on the Internet by adults in developed countries was seen as virtually permanently online and connected. There is no doubt, following these numbers, that the online self is highly linked to offline consciousness and well-being (Steele et al., 2020). The growth of media has been exponential since the birth of the Internet. It has been seen that 90% of young adults in the U.S. use social media every day (an increase from 12.5% in 2005) (Bettmann et al., 2020) and 96% between sixteen and twenty-four years old in the UK (Bell, 2019; Shankleman et al., 2021). YouTube was one of the founding social media sources to revolutionize traditional media (Pires et al., 2021). Since 2005, it has become one of the largest platforms for accessing, searching, watching, sharing, and creating video content and has over 1.9 million monthly users. It was reported that with 500 million and 181 million respective users, there are 1.8 billion images uploaded daily on Instagram and Snapchat (Bell, 2019). Young

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adults accounted for 78% of Snapchat users. It was noted that 69% of adults in the U.S. use social media, most of whom are on Facebook (Kondakciu et al., 2021). Users of Facebook, 68% of them, use it as their source of news. Research was also done based on social media statistics that used activity logs and search histories as bases for interview questions (Gangneux, 2019). Over 50% of Internet users have at least two social media accounts (the reasons for which will be described later in the chapter) (Huang & Chang, 2020). This information, combined with the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic increased these numbers and showed a rise in mental disorders as well as suicides (Sewall et al., 2022) is alarming. Additionally, over 25% of videos viewed on YouTube regarding COVID-19 had misleading information (Jalen et al., 2022).

### **Negative**

Previous studies show that 30% of college students are depressed, which is correlated to their social media use (Bettmann et al., 2020; Wilson & Stock, 2021). The comparison to others through social media, negative feedback (body shaming), and the importance given to these opinions (feedback) were seen to lead to a negative correlation to time spent on Facebook. The anonymity that the Internet provides gives courage to some but causes issues for others. For instance, the LGBTQ community is often cyberbullied on social media, which affects their development and well-being (Dodemaide et al., 2019; Salk et al., 2020).

There are dangers with Internet media that are often overlooked or lost in the abundance of media. However, media is sensational and uses sound bites or headlines (as seen with Facebook) to appeal to audiences. Content producers purposefully simplify and exaggerate information (Sidani et al., 2022). Social media is also a source of rumors or conspiracy theories, which spread quicker than facts (Jalen et al., 2022). During COVID-19, a claim that ingesting concentrated alcohol would kill the coronavirus spread across the Internet and resulted in

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approximately 800 deaths and 5,800 hospitalizations around the world (Jalen et al., 2022). The virtual community is filled with user-generated content, professional journalism, and expert opinions that all appear together through Google searches with seldom barriers or distinctions between them for the reader to segment. Parenting is also forced to adapt as there is now a new realm parents must monitor; online (Jeffrey, 2020). The comfort of the home is no longer protected as children are exposed to an online world with all its dangers.

It is important to be aware of the signs of overconsumption of media. Six factors were found to determine the limit: Salience (when social media becomes the most important aspect of one's life), mood modification (a sense of relief when using to escape), tolerance (spending more and more time online), withdrawal (a state of unease when unable to be online), conflict (when life gets in the way of social media), relapse (returning to overconsumption after a period of average use) (Bettmann et al., 2020). Some signs of overconsumption of Internet media are difficulty expressing oneself in a real-life social setting, inability to interact with others, and trouble expressing emotions (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015).

Although much research has shown the negative correlations between Internet media and well-being, some research showed that this correlation, when significant, tended to be minimal (Sheldon & Titova, 2023; Steele et al., 2020). These opposing studies believed that individual differences were a major factor in mental well-being. Along with this, the change in the amount of leisure time and choice of method to occupy this time was argued to be a key component in the increase of depression, loneliness, suicide, and sleep issues.

### **Positive**

Not only with its' shortcomings, Internet media also has numerous benefits as well. Online support, knowledge, and experience sharing, and the development of virtual communities

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have also been used through online experience (Das-Friebel et al., 2020). Identity exploration was made more convenient through the Internet and social media. College student members of the LGBTQ community use social media for social communication, identity exploration, identity expression, and finding romantic partners (Allen et al., 2021; Dodemaide et al., 2019; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020). Trust can also be increased through social media as experts can talk to people directly, not through a third party, such as a journalist (L'Engle et al., 2023). Life experiences, identity, and interests can be shared through shared posts and photos (Dodemaide et al., 2019; Pera et al., 2020). The study by Pera et al. (2020) demonstrated how photo sharing increased well-being by turning an event that was lived alone into one that can be shared with others, and more platforms that are used to share leads to even more increased well-being. Users multitask media search for fulfilling remarks about themselves that are positive and rewarding (Shukla, 2022).

Across countries, positive similarities were seen in Internet media consumers' behaviors. Extraversion, agreeableness, well-being, and conscientiousness were all positively linked to social media (Bettmann et al., 2020; Vaid & Harari, 2021). Social media can help in learning as well. Students find new and interesting ways to explore and feed their curiosity (Shankleman et al., 2021). Moods are changed through the excitement of new learning, and there is a sense of general happiness and healthy well-being. Users found social media helped as it was a source of entertainment and laughter, an escape from reality. Internet media as a distraction or escape directly relates to developmental learning in emotional regulation (Shankleman et al., 2021).

Contrary to how the Internet brought in a new space for parents to monitor their children, it also ushered in a space for reluctant fathers to reach out for parenting advice (Teague & Shatte, 2021). Men who may have been raised to believe it was wrong to seek help and therefore never

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developed support methods now have that possibility. Online communities allow them to connect father-to-father, extend their network, and avoid social stigmas. Not only for fathers, but virtual communities also provide a place for parents to share parenting skills in managing their children's media use (Jeffery, 2020).

Internet media has created a space for users to share thoughts, reach out for support, and a virtual community (Das-Friebel et al., 2020). Although negative aspects like cyberbullying or suicide pact development occur online, there are also groups to counter incidents like these. Suicide prevention awareness, cyberbullying reporting buttons on websites, anonymously alerting troubled behaviors, or sharing a hard experience all work towards exemplifying the positives of Internet media. Social support from social media showed decreased loneliness, namely in the LGBTQ community (Bettemann et al., 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019). It also helped social behavior in the real world with more opportunities to create friendships by managing shyness and demonstrated how social media has helped keep in touch with distant friends or family members (Shankleman et al., 2021).

### **Change in Media**

Internet media has changed the face of media forever. Research is done based on social media statistics using activity logs and search histories as the basis for interview questions (Burns et al., 2020; Gangneux, 2019). Viewers are creating content, and digital communities exist to socialize virtually. A main focal point of change was the initiating of feedback. Consumers are no longer passer viewers of media but are active influencers and commentators (Kim, 2021). The one-to-one-directional message has been modified to a two-directional message and one-to-many format (Hayes et al., 2021; Kim, 2021). Due in part to this, maintaining audiences as they have been spread across Internet media channels is no longer the

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same as it once was. Consumers have begun to create and circulate content among themselves (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020).

Media selection is commonly done to satisfy a need (Huang & Chang, 2020). In making a selection, there are three categories to choose from: media traits (media richness, synchronicity, and social pressure), situational factors, and social influence. Social media is used for socializing, entertainment, information seeking/sharing, affection, connection, and self-status seeking. The content generated and shared by users on Instagram can be categorized into three distinct types: (a) self-presentation, which includes photos and videos of themselves; (b) portrayal of the surroundings, encompassing images and videos of landscapes, locations, moments, or special occasions; and (c) depiction of social interactions, consisting of photos and videos featuring friends and, to a lesser extent, family members. As uploading content to Instagram or any other platform is open to anyone, all types of content are viewable, and due to this, users can build their own social media ecologies that satisfy their desires (Vaid & Harari, 2021). Media has become more interactive as two-way communication is now possible thanks to social media. Comments and opinions are now a part of the news with anyone able to express their thoughts. Media is also increasing support for products, ideas, views, and opinions. Mere hours after promoting an online service to help quit smoking, adolescents were flooding in to sign up for the program (Graham et al., 2019).

Mimicking and setting unrealistic standards based on the media flooding the market and online space with images may not be new, but there is a new option to comment or leave feedback that is (Kim, 2021). Social media platforms are not oblivious to this fact, and most have added easy editing tools for uploaded pictures (Bell, 2019). Media platform designers also made the ease of creating, sharing, and responding to images fast, simple, and cheap. Influencing

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factors are no longer limited to only the message itself but also the comments of others.

Feedback adds a group or mob mentality to the perception of the content, which affects the processing of the information (Kim, 2021). Different developmental stages can be influenced differently and, therefore, have different understandings.

Content can be for entertainment purposes or informational (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020), but ultimately, how the message is perceived depends on the receiver's motives and apprehension (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2018). College-aged media users often rely on media to learn social norms and behaviors (Kim & Lee, 2021). Media is setting young adults up for failure with unattainable goals and unreal expectations; consumers of media feel inept when they do not reach them (Clarke, 2021; Hall, 2019; Lutkenhaus et al., 2020; Tchernev et al., 2021). It is not hard to see why young adults may set their expectations high, as the message expressed by media makes it look easy to do the impossible and usually do it in 30 to 60 minutes (the length of an episode).

### **Internet Gaming**

Previous research has shown both the positive (well-being and social environment) and negative (psychological, physiological, and behavioral issues) effects of online gameplay (Biegun et al., 2019; Bonny & Castaneda, 2022; Haagsma et al., 2013; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Musetti et al., 2019; Navarro, 2021; Shapiro, 2018; Vaid & Harari, 2021; Vizard et al., 2022). For instance, a digital world gives a sense of escape from the hardships of life, but this can be addictive and consuming (Goh et al., 2019). The Internet is the source of many addictions leading to multiple psychological, behavioral, and physical issues when overused (including gaming). Depression, general anxiety disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and

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dysregulation of emotions are just a few examples of associations seen with extensive online gameplay (Goh et al., 2019).

By the age of twelve, 69% of children in the U.S. have a smartphone and 85% have allotted time for screen use (Bagot et al., 2022). Their time spent on screens averages seven hours daily. These numbers and information have reached the point of concern that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the DSM-5 have included online gaming as an addictive disorder in their respective manuals. They have also given guidelines on healthy Internet use (a minimum of one hour of physical activity, no screens for one hour before bed, and the appropriate amount of screen time in a day). However, only 5% of users were noted to follow this routine.

The gaming industry was worth 43.4 billion dollars in 2018 (Biegun et al., 2019). There were 2.8 billion active players worldwide in 2020, making video games one of the largest forms of entertainment (Lemercier-Dugarin et al., 2021). Studies show that game designers purposively add complexities or design and engender temporal experiences that prompt engagement (Rapp, 2022). A common belief of why users turn to video games is that the games satisfy three psychological needs: competence (processing knowledge or skills needed), autonomy (owning up to one's decision), and relatedness (belonging) (Mills et al., 2018). What is being seen by the data is that these three factors are the premise for Internet gaming disorder, as frustration from the three traits leads one to video games. The desire to satisfy these needs in a video game environment is known as the application of self-determination theory; as the needs are frustrated in the real world, gamers turn to video games for satisfaction (Mills et al., 2018). Video game designers are creating games based on this model. Psychological, behavioral, and physiologic

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sequelae interfere with work or academics, social and interpersonal behavior, health and self-care, and motivation (Greenfield, 2022).

The Video Game Uses and Gratifications (VGUG) scale is used to determine the different motives for why people play the video games they do (Bonny & Castaneda, 2022). The scale shows six motivation categories: arousal (playing for stimulation), challenge (playing to perfect skills), competition (playing to test skills against other players), diversion (playing to escape real-life issues), fantasy (engaging in play that is not possible in real life), and social interaction (playing to interact with friends and other individuals). Game genres like first-person shooters were associated with increased social motivations, while multiplayer online role-playing games had a higher likelihood of players wanting a story mode, competition, escapism, game mechanics, avatar customization, and social interaction. Results of the study showed a significant difference between players' desire to play for arousal, challenge, and socializing far surpassed those of competition, diversion, and fantasy. Video games are seen as a stimulus to help short-term well-being by satisfying psychological needs (Biegun et al., 2019). Selecting a game genre is a way of identity formation, as the player can select from shooter games, strategy, or role-playing (Entwistle et al., 2020). Each game type offers different personality and developmental traits. Emotional attachments between online players with a sense of commitment to the group can be made. Also, when playing and communicating in a game through text, the player can take their time drafting, editing, and re-editing a message before sending it. This extra time and editing allow for various self-presentation strategies (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015).

Online video games also help autistic users unwind (Pavlopoulou et al., 2022). Those with autism also use online gaming to create and maintain friendships, emotional regulation, skill development, and escape. The study by Pavlopoulou et al. (2022) showed how autistic users

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would benefit from this fantasy world that allowed them to walk, talk like everyone else, and try new personal identities. Autistic players said that they get to live through these characters and add traits and skills to them, so being powerful was a key motivator for them.

Excessive gameplay has been noted to rework behaviors and development (Shapiro, 2018). One example of this is the temptation of cheating. Where manipulation of the game is possible in board games, sports, or other forms of physical gameplay, this is not an option with video games. A player must obey the rules and conform their behaviors to the game and their actions accordingly. There are three general motivations: achievement, social interaction, and immersion. The study by Goh et al. (2019) showed that the more one played, the lower their level of wellness was. They also showed that self-esteem influences the negative effects of video games, and they were more likely to play to avoid real-life issues.

Internet gaming is associated with neuroticism and impeding traits of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Vaid & Harari, 2021), but it is also linked to multiple benefits. Biologically, online video games have been noted to reinforce thought patterns by strengthening neuropathways that alter decision-making, attention allocation, values, concepts, and social skills (emotional regulation, confidence, conflict resolution, and boundaries) (Shapiro, 2018). Executive functions like flexibility, resilience, accommodations, multitasking, and memory are exercised through gaming as well. A digital environment is created through online video games and social media that set the stage for cognitive-social learning with social observation, rehearsal, and feedback (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). This environment can increase social skills by growing one's worldview (allowing one to explore ethical and moral reasoning in a safe and controlled space) and psychological growth.

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The online world is vast, with a global reach, and socializing is the number one motivator to play (Bonny & Castaneda, 2022). A study showed how players on Fortnite socialize and learn prosocial behaviors (Navarro, 2021). In the study by Navarro (2021), a gamer met a new player online who was celebrating his birthday and took him into his squad so the new player would get more items and have a fun game as he was well protected by the more experienced players, showing prosocial behaviors. Although a game may be violent by nature to kill and conquer (like in Fortnite, Call of Duty, and similar battle games), there is also teamwork and helping that is happening as well. Healing, sharing resources, and team tactics are all part of the game and play their role in social development. The digital world is known to be more comforting and offers a feeling of closeness, belonging, and security and a buffer for any social difficulties (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015).

Social skills are developed online as they offer a space to counter fears of social anxiety and stress (Pavlopoulou et al., 2022; Vizard et al., 2022). Added benefits of anonymity and no face-to-face interactions permit ease of communication and can particularly help in dealing with anxiety, autism, and other social behavior-related issues. Overcoming these obstacles gives media consumers confidence as a person. Online interactions have also been used as mood stabilizers (Haagsma et al., 2013). Individuals dealing with depression may interact for longer durations, but this is because it helps them combat boredom and loneliness or gives them an escape (Haagsma et al., 2013). The virtual community allows consumers to socialize when they are perhaps unable to do so in real life as they are faced with interpersonal problems like loneliness. In addition to promoting positive social skill development, online interaction impacts positive psychological well-being, like maintaining a social network, enhancing positive effects, and improving well-being (Goh et al., 2019).

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Studies show online friendships are often converted to real-world contexts and friendships, growing social circles. During the game, the player must adapt and make decisions, and feel the consequences of their choice; at times, the players face a challenge as a team (Navarro, 2021). These are all key factors to social development that adolescents are getting from games. Violent behaviors following gameplay come from individuals who were already dealing with aggressive personality traits or psychoticism (Lemercier-Dugarin, 2021). Antisocial behaviors that can be seen in gamers are flaming (harassing and verbally assaulting other players) and grieving (sabotaging a group game). In-game behavior is based on the online social context, and less on the type of game itself (ex. violent video games). Co-op teams playing in a violent game are viewed as having less aggressive behavior.

Online gaming does not only have its' benefits but comes with its risks as well. The online world is no refuge from predators (Vizard et al., 2022). Even in digital communities, they have been known to stalk. In an environment of developing minds, behaviors, and identities, there is an urgency for awareness of Internet activity. Another aspect gamers need to be concerned with is the current rise in terrorist recruitment through online gaming (Koehler et al., 2023). The European Union Counterterrorism Coordinator warned that the digital gaming world is potentially a support hub for terrorist activities and recruitment. Gaming platforms like Steam and Twitch were known as being hotbeds for radicalization.

A leading concern with Internet gaming is excess. Addictive behavior in Internet media shares many similarities with all forms of addiction. Self-determination theory (SDT) demonstrates how the need to play video games and the lack of self-control contribute to gaming addiction (Mills & Allen, 2020). Across the board is a lack of impulse control, cognitive rigidity, and attention bias (Dong & Pontenza, 2022). People with an addiction also share many common

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traits: loneliness, depression, and problems with self-regulation. There is also neurobiological evidence showing social media “Likes” to activate the ventral striatum and ventral tegmental areas in the brain, which are responsible for regulating reward, addictive behaviors, and the dopamine feedback loop (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Sherman et al., 2018). Diagnoses of these disorders are made based on the salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, relapse, and harm over three to six months of the player (Biegun, 2019). Addiction can lead to extremes where cases of suicide were noted following a gaming addiction (Mamun & Griffiths, 2020). It is also often used to escape reality or regulate mood (Gonga et al., 2019). Like with any addiction, dependency is an issue leading to problems with tolerance as it becomes a factor with more gameplay needed to get the same mood-regulating and escapism effect. Gaming addiction is best explained through social cognitive theory, which suggests the following traits to be of concern for Internet gaming addiction: loneliness, depression, and deficient self-regulation. Of all the available Internet activities, online gaming is among the most addictive (Greenfield, 2022). Some colleges have begun support groups for their students who are dealing with Internet addictions (Young, 2009). Telling signs of an Internet gaming disorder are sociodemographic features, the clinical path the condition took, psychopathological symptoms, and personality traits (Granero et al., 2021).

Many minds are still developing, and behavioral control is not fully prepared for these added challenges, thereby making defending against gaming addiction more difficult, with gender differentiation in brain activity adding to this issue (Irie et al., 2022). Images from an fMRI seen in the study by Irie et al. (2022) showed much less activity in the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and increased stratal activity in males. Irie et al. (2022) also showed that cue-elicited cravings were seen in both genders with lentiform activation, which is

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associated with reward processing. Brain scanning was done through fMRI to identify neural features that may predict Internet gaming disorder (Wang et al., 2022). The bilateral middle frontal gyrus, precuneus, and posterior lobe of the right cerebellum were the main areas seen in the study by Wang et al. (2022) to have activity when doing cue-reactivity tasks. The research by Wang et al. (2022) showed cravings to be active in the right middle frontal gyrus, superior frontal gyrus, supramarginal gyrus, anterior/posterior lobes of the cerebellum, and left postcentral gyrus. There is a phenomenological overlap between Internet addiction and substance addiction, suggesting a similar neurobiological pathway for reward seeking (Greenfield, 2022). The mesolimbic dopamine pathway is potentially the neurobiological reinforcement sequence and the biobehavioral addiction response from behavioral or pharmacologic stimuli. Studies suggest that dopamine is the shared neurotransmitter initiating pleasure, controlling pain, and causing reward-seeking in all addictions (Greenfield, 2022).

Internet gaming was shown to come with benefits and risks, but many of these factors are based on the players themselves. Disordered players (high amount of gameplay and severe signs of problematic use) are more susceptible to the risks of problematic game use and Internet gaming disorder, but also psychological maladjustments (Musetti et al., 2019). These players were shown to have multiple maladaptive personality traits and psychopathological symptoms with the highest rate of signs of psychoticism, psychotic symptoms, and suicidal ideation. An 18-year-old boy committed suicide following being bullied at school for his appearance. He often turned to his video games for comfort, showing addictive traits as mentioned by his father, and quoted his favorite game in his suicide note (Mamun & Griffiths, 2020). Other cases mentioned adolescents who committed suicide after their phone was taken away so they could not play and because their parents refused to buy them a recently released video game (Fortsch et al., 2021).

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Frequent risk factors for suicide are related to academics, relationships, family, finances, trauma, social isolation, mental issues, and addictive disorders (Mamun & Griffiths, 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019).

Self-regulation was shown to pay the price of using the Internet as a crutch for regulating one's inner state (Haagsma et al., 2013). The ability to self-regulate emotions was hindered by excessive gameplay. Dependency can develop where online interactivity is sought over in-person interactions. There is a need for face-to-face interactions to develop certain social skills, including conversation skills (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Players who have a problem with gaming use have shown a similar trait: escapism (Banyai et al., 2019).

### **Marketing**

There are no limits to the media's reach as popular media characters are used to sell food and products to infants (Vanderbilt & Anderson, 2022). Marketers have worked branding down to a science. Those who produce media are conscious of the fact that their message may be interpreted in a different way than intended (Masiello et al., 2019). They also use social media to promote brand personality, the typical traits matched with a brand, and can even be used in the flow and building of an event based on social media comments and habits. Perhaps without knowing, social media users have increased consumer power and have become decision-makers. The change in power for social media users has brought about electronic word-of-mouth. Events like Comicon are, in ways being co-created with social media commentators as organizers are adapting to them. While commentators may think they are sharing their opinions with peers, marketers are listening for suggestions. Travel is affected similarly as media is now being implemented in trips to entice visitors (McWhea & Beeton, 2018). Movie landmarks increase tourism as travelers want to visit the location of their favorite film and/or TV series. It reshapes

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the qualitative approach through online word-of-mouth communication (Wu et al., 2019).

Branding and business as a whole are being affected by Internet media, which directly relates to development. The impact of marketing on development has been so intertwined that young adults have internalized marketing strategies and verbiage in their lives (they speak of audiences, views, engagement, and sponsorship) (Marquez et al., 2022).

### ***Influencer***

What appears to have been a natural evolution from the birth of YouTube in 2005, and younger generations practicing taking pictures, editing, selecting, hiding, and sharing photos and videos as part of a daily routine, came the creation of a new form of media channel that encompasses all of these newly developed skills which lead to the rise of Internet influencers (Marquez et al., 2022). Influencers have now created a position for themselves to do just that and influence (Ren et al., 2022). These skills are the foundation of creating an online persona on social media, including content creation that will be judged by the number of “Likes” and followers received. Young adults have used social media platforms and converted them into professional endeavors for themselves by using the self as a marketing commodity. Becoming a social influencer for their community (gender, sexuality, fashion, sports, parenting, or any topic they deem themselves to be an expert in), they create their content while recommending other services (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020). The two-step flow model compares today’s influencers to opinion leaders. These are generally initial media sources where the influencer either creates it or gives their view on topics or new information. Through their media platform (often YouTube), media influencers have interpersonal conversations with their supporters, questions are posed, and conversations are started. Due to influencers, traffic to social media platforms has increased and a new marketplace, revenue stream, and careers have been created (Marquez et al., 2022).

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Underdeveloped minds are ripe for these influencers to lead in the direction they choose, as they are seen as the new celebrities that younger generations model themselves after.

### ***Audience***

Gone are the days of tuning into one of four TV channels to watch the news or an article in the newspaper that everyone has read. Audiences currently seek their information from many sources; often to counter-verify the validity (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020). The widespread of sources has made listeners harder to reach as they are spread across multiple platforms and may be isolated from their niche interests. Being isolated from interactions and information that seek merely to reinforce their biases, echo chambers increase polarization and division. Echo chambers are partially to blame for the spread of misinformation (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Kraft & Donovan, 2020). Transmedia storytelling is a strategy to circumvent this phenomenon. A message is spread to multiple entry points and designed for the specific audience based on the platform as determined by personalized algorithms. The clicks, “likes”, and shares done by a consumer are recorded to build for network framing and structuring online conversations. Algorithms bring media to the next level as they listen in, track activity, and presume the direction of conversations/searches (Hayes et al., 2021). Social media listening platforms (SMLP) that are engines by artificial intelligence are actively extracting mass information from social media that is used to create tailored marketing strategies.

### **Persuasion**

The media does not attempt to hide the fact that they push persuasive messages, although the degree of persuasion is often questionable (Sheldon, 2020). It is widely acknowledged that media communication can effectively sway audiences with less emphasis on the communicator’s intentions. Visual elements, such as graphical images, are often more persuasive than verbal

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reasoning (Chen et al., 2022). Studies have demonstrated that media can shape beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Morrison et al., 2020; Silva & Silva, 2010; Tchernev et al., 2021). This change in attitudes, beliefs, and actions is partially explained through transportation theory, which posits that when individuals engage with literature, films, or television, they immerse themselves in the narrative's world, momentarily distancing themselves from certain aspects of reality.

Subsequently, the beliefs and attitudes of the audience often align with those portrayed in the narrative.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) explains media selection (L'Engle et al., 2023). It proposes that a user chooses the content they actively interact with (central processing) and the content they scroll past without deeper engagement (peripheral processing). According to the ELM, individuals who actively engage with content are more prone to be influenced by it.

Messages on social media are seen to be the least trustworthy as they are a heavily persuasive source compared to traditional news. It is a fine line between persuasion and manipulation following a list of techniques (Charron & Annoni, 2021; Kraftt & Donovan, 2020): Rumors (consciously giving misinformation that remains ambiguous so the listener engages in collective sensemaking), trading up the chain (purposely trying to make a message more visible on mainstream media), media artifacts (these are created to gain support for the disinformation and discredit competing messages), platform filtering (altering the flow of a message), and algorithms (automatic distribution of misleading information).

In addition to persuasion and manipulation techniques, there are infodemic situations where information is spread chaotically (Ferrara et al., 2020; L'Engle et al., 2023). Sharing of false information, the emergence of adverse conditions, users' dissatisfaction, concerns about online interactions and appropriate information sharing, distress caused by negative experiences

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shared within the community, and no editorial gatekeeper to distinguish between information and misinformation (Jalan et al., 2022; L'Engle et al., 2023; Wilson & Stock, 2021). True information is lost in a sea of low-credible, fake, misleading, and unverified news. Even though the sources of a significant portion of disinformation are unclear, it frequently finds its way through established media channels, leading to an “amplifier effect” for stories that would have been deemed implausible in previous times when press gatekeeping was more stringent (Kraftt & Donovan, 2020). This lack of reliability in information was heavily seen through the COVID-19 pandemic, with misinformation spreading like wildfire online in social media, and misinformation like conspiracy theories is remembered over a longer period as compared to factual information (Ferrara et al., 2020; L'Engle et al., 2023). Misinformation was shared more than information from an official health source, and jokes (memes) added to this by reinforcing false truths. Digital sleuthing (crowd-sourced investigations) is done by forum members who utilize available public information and search engines to create accusations and identify potential culprits before receiving an official statement from the police (Kraftt & Donovan, 2020).

Clickbait is another tactic used in media to persuade consumers into a false sense of being informed (Apresjan & Orlov, 2022). These are ambiguous and deceptive headlines designed to exploit readers' curiosity by making promises that exceed what the actual article provides and intentionally create false expectations to lure readers in. Platforms are creating tools to detect clickbait automatically. From a psychological perspective, it is associated with qualities like sensationalism, emotionalism, enticement, and dramatization. They often use specific conversational implications in particular linguistic conditions. For instance, “Some students can afford off-campus housing,” which implies that “Not all students can afford off-campus housing”

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(Apresjan & Orlov, 2022). For marketing strategies to be more efficient and gather more clicks, clickbait needs to strike a balance by avoiding obvious falsehoods and amplifying the perceived appeal.

The last method of persuasion covered here is deepfakes, which are incredibly lifelike digital impersonations or manipulations of images, videos, and audio generated using a neural networks machine-learning technique called a generative adversarial network (GAN) (Nieweglowska et al., 2023). These were found to be more believable and efficient in inducing false memories than other techniques. Deepfakes can potentially elevate ambiguity regarding content and erode trust in the media by increasing the spread of misinformation. False news like this led to a 50% reduction in news consumption among Republicans and a 38% reduction among Democrats.

On average, individuals who rely on social media for their news tend to perceive higher levels of corruption than those who primarily obtain news from alternative sources (Charron & Annoni, 2021; Sheldon, 2020). The difference in corruption perception between supporters of the current government and those backing opposition parties is more pronounced among social media consumers. Although all media offer citizens information to assess their political institutions, different news sources have distinct motivations for shaping this information. In a broad sense, news presented by more traditional sources is expected to convey more favorable (less critical) information to those in positions of power. Editorial filtering in traditional media typically tones down coverage of political corruption issues that counter the interests of the elite political class. If the current patterns persist, the growing use of social media could potentially lead to heightened public polarization when evaluating political institutions and placing trust in the system. An empirical study by Charron and Annoni (2021) indicates that individuals with

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strong political affiliations tend to embrace favorable news related to their preferred party while selectively screening or dismissing unfavorable information.

Media practices empower media entities as discursive agents who can effectively employ, recycle, modify, and even craft their unique rhetorical elements to convey persuasive messages (Mateus, 2021). Research has indicated that narratives possess persuasive potential, with the ability to influence individuals' understanding, convictions, and outlook (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020). Persuasion occurs when audiences become immersed in the narrative world, a phenomenon known as narrative processing. Proof of this was seen in the study by Morrison et al. (2020), where college students were asked their thoughts on a possible treatment. Before asking the question, the researchers showed one of two video clips of shows talking positively or negatively about the treatment. Suffice it to say that the answers matched up with the opinions of the videos. Audiences can form an identification with a story's characters and establish imaginary relationships with them (Lutkenhaus et al., 2020). This phenomenon is termed "parasocial interaction," and it amplifies the persuasive impact of stories by potentially undermining the audience's ability to assess the message critically.

Exerting authority over the media equates to shaping the narrative, and this narrative can be tailored to fit specific agendas or objectives (Hall, 2019). Media possesses the power to shape the storyline that defines our existence. Ask an American about the Vietnam War and ask a Vietnamese person. Hollywood's portrayal of Vietnam is peculiar; it represents a war rather than a nation (Clarke, 2021). The motives of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) are seldom clear as to why communism appeals to the north. Instead, the narrative is that it is a stylistic choice, and there is little to no mention of the Southern Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) even though they were involved far before the American army. In reality, the

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war fought in Vietnam, and the war recreated on film sets in the Philippine jungles two decades later are two distinct but equally impactful realities. The projected image of Vietnam has become its shared memory, and this fictionalized battlefield narrative has gained global acceptance, including within Southeast Asia. These Hollywood movies, in terms of cultural significance, have become the primary source for understanding the Vietnam War, overshadowing documentaries, news footage, and media produced by Vietnam itself. Especially for those born after the war, films have seamlessly integrated into the collective memory of those directly impacted by the conflict and those who witnessed it through television broadcasts. This media offered a form of emotional release to an unsettled public who were still attempting to comprehend the information they had received about Vietnam (Clarke, 2021).

Knowledge is under the persuasion of the media and what is learned is what is shared (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Film and television producers rely on fact-checkers for their facts. There is a business based in a university that researches and gives these facts to content creators (<https://learcenter.org/about>). Television shows like Grey's Anatomy will call this organization to get realistic procedures and terminology to give validity to the show/movie.

Individuals have been shown to view messages in a higher light when they coincide with their own beliefs (Oh, 2020). The validity and source of the information were a less important factor when compared to a message supporting their views. The message is stronger as it confirms their preexisting beliefs. The reverse is also true and seen in the hostile media effect hypothesis (Oh, 2020). When a viewer/user of media has a strong opinion on an issue, any coverage of it is seen in a negative light. Although a message may be unbiased, the strong opinions will tip the scale to a feeling of one that opposes their own. Certain events and narratives are disregarded due to limited resources preventing comprehensive coverage

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(Fitzpatrick, 2018). A selective approach to news coverage occasionally resulted in a biased and less well-informed portrayal of consumer news. A study by Oh (2020) showed the viewers of an anti-smoking ad were turned on to smoking because of it. The viewers of the ad felt that if the ad was necessary, then most of their peers must be smoking and the need to belong was more powerful than the need to remain healthy. Another example was seen with two Christian newspapers that published multiple articles that accused a pastor of heresy because of how he interpreted the Bible (Oh, 2020). These articles divided his parish as half agreed while the other half did not, but both sides were basing their decisions on the articles and their interpretations.

### **Fake News**

As early as 1486, European royalty appeared to understand the advantages of disseminating their message through the press (Fitzpatrick, 2018). In England, King Henry VII capitalized on the relatively new printing press to circulate an announcement regarding his somewhat questionable claim to the throne. Similarly, in France, Charles VIII used the press to convey what he perceived as the positive aspects of his invasion of Italy. Throughout history, numerous world leaders have recognized the benefits of shaping the media and public agenda. American presidents have not been exempted from this practice President Nixon and his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, established the first White House communications office with the aim of “molding the President’s image” (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Nixon pioneered tactics for manipulating the media: Intimidating journalists, avoiding White House reporters, and staging events for television, which are now common presidential practices, were all originally Nixonian tactics.

Another key concept is the distribution of misleading or fake news (Anthony & Moulding, 2018; Charron & Annoni, 2021; Chiu & Oh, 2020; Miura, S., 2019). Fake news is regarded as one of the most significant challenges to both democracy and journalism (Zhou et

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al., 2020). There has been a loss of faith in media where even the source of local and global news (News stations), are not fact-checking or are giving a one-sided version of a story to enhance the drama effect (Anthony & Moulding, 2018). The extensive influence of fake news became especially evident during the pivotal months of the 2016 presidential election campaign. During this period, the top 20 frequently discussed fake election stories garnered a staggering 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook (Zhou et al., 2020). This number exceeded the total engagement of 7,367,000 for the top 20 most-discussed election stories posted by 19 major news websites. Media manipulation can be described as the practice of managing communication systems and organizations to serve one's interests (Fitzpatrick, 2018). One of the most thorough legal definitions of this term states that it involves crafting an image or argument that supports specific interests (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Additionally, according to this legal definition, media manipulation encompasses the utilization of logical fallacies and propaganda techniques, as well as the suppression of information or perspectives. The definition also highlights the strategy of diverting attention elsewhere as part of this practice.

There is a growing trend of deceptive content, manipulated images, or edited videos being circulated on social media (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Khan & Idris, 2019; Lawson et al., 2023). Deceptive information rapidly spreads and becomes viral within a matter of minutes (Lawson et al., 2023). In these situations, the competitive environment within journalism can induce reporters and their superiors to feel compelled to present it as news urgently, without initially verifying its accuracy (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Distant relatives, individuals from the past, or even total strangers are now actively sharing viral videos, family photos, and news articles, both genuine and fabricated, through social media. Fake news is not a recent development, but its impact has grown considerably in recent years, primarily due to the rise of social media as a

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daily news source (Capraro & Celadin, 2022). In 2020, 67% of Americans reported using social media for daily news consumption. Similar percentages can be observed in the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands, with even higher figures in countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Bulgaria, where 70% of the adult population relies on social media for news content. This emerging reliance on social media as a primary source of news has played a role in diminishing public trust in mainstream media (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Khan & Idris, 2019; Lawson et al., 2023; Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). Trust levels hit an all-time low in 2016 (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Distrust and uncertainty regarding news stories and their coverage have also arisen due to the proliferation of “fake news” stories, which have become more numerous and prominent. Discerning the “truth” is increasingly challenging because there exists a counterfact for every fact. In certain instances, these counterfacts have been compelling enough to effectively erode the credibility of the truth (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Health agencies are grappling with internal challenges as they strive to provide the public with accurate information (Jalan et al., 2022). Given the trust issues associated with the media, these agencies are faced with the task of devising effective strategies to disseminate essential information on self-protection and the prevention of virus transmission. During the quest for COVID-19-related information, the general population turned to both traditional and social media outlets for guidance and information (Jalan et al., 2022). Historically, national newspapers have enjoyed a reputation for professionalism, reliability, and credibility as sources of information. This reputation has allowed readers to make decisions with a heightened sense of assurance, thereby alleviating anxiety.

Accepting false information can prompt individuals to make choices that are detrimental to their or others' well-being (Capraro & Celadin, 2022). A real-life example of how fake news is a danger to society is seen in Edgar Welch (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Khan & Idris, 2019). This citizen

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was so convinced by the fabricated story that he armed himself with an assault rifle and traveled a considerable distance to rescue abused children from a pizza restaurant, supposedly. Inside the restaurant, Welch fired a few shots, but fortunately, no one was harmed, and he was subsequently arrested. This incident represents one of the many fake news stories circulating on the Internet. The issue of fake news is not confined to North America. Just a few weeks after this incident at the pizza restaurant, a false news story triggered a nuclear threat statement from Pakistan's defense minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, who tweeted "Israel forgets Pakistan is a Nuclear state too" (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This reaction seemed to stem from an erroneous report on a website claiming that Israel had issued nuclear threats against Pakistan. In China, the term "fake news" made its debut in March 2017 when state media responded to allegations of government torture made by a prominent rights activist. Some researchers have linked China's use of the term to Donald Trump's ongoing criticisms of Western media organizations. Although fake news, rumors, and gossip have long been societal concerns, their significance has grown with the spread of social media and, seemingly, their greater impact on the public.

### **Politics**

Studies have shown a positive connection between consuming news through various channels like television, newspapers, online news platforms, and social media and one's level of political knowledge (Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). Though media may not have a direct relationship to imposing or creating our laws, it does help elect our government officials who do. Donald Trump, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ronald Reagan, Jesse the Body Venture, and all celebrities who transitioned into politics already had a following before running for office and no direct political experience before being elected. This lack of experience demonstrates that the media landscape continues to have a significant impact on fostering political awareness, even in

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the era of social media dominance (Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). Certainly, the media exerts a significant influence on public opinion. For this reason, some authoritarian governments intervene in the media industry. Governments can directly control the media sector by contacting media owners and censoring content, or indirectly control the media by pressuring them to favorably cover governmental issues (Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). Citizens living in a “freer” media environment are more knowledgeable politically than those in non-free media environments. Considering this, it is no wonder that public trust in government, media, and business is at the lowest point in history (L’Engle et al., 2023). Social media platforms broaden access to information and the ability to express oneself (Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021). In nations where press freedom is on the decline, social media can serve as an alternative avenue for the dissemination of information. Although the interpretation of the message comes down to the listener’s attitude. Dissonance theory and selective interpretation determine how one would rate the turnout of a presidential debate based on who they are voting for (Zhou et al., 2020).

Social media can manipulate politics as consumers research news on their party and get one-sided information (L’Engle et al., 2023). Knowing only one side, one digs into their beliefs and turns the discussion into an “us” versus “them” situation. The second effect of media sources on corruption perceptions is the distribution of opinion between groups that receive news from different sources (e.g., what is often referred to as ‘polarization’ on the topic) (Manusov & Compton, 2023; Sheldon, 2020). The more often individuals use social media for information, the better the chance they will engage in political activities (Kim & Lee, 2021). The typical person often lacks awareness of politics because obtaining political information is costly. Internet platforms enhance political participation by lowering the expenses associated with information acquisition and by offering more accessible means of engaging in political activities (Kim & Lee,

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2021). Additionally, these platforms are viewed as being at least somewhat important in fostering enduring social movements for change (Khan & Idris, 2019; Park & Gil de Zuniga, 2021).

Recent surveys indicate that a substantial 66% of Americans consider social media to be significant in capturing the attention of elected officials regarding various issues (Fitzpatrick, 2018). The cultivation of social and political influence involves the management of communication media (Meyrowitz, 1994; Sheldon, 2020). This management provides both societal elites and media elites with a means to advocate and advance their specific agendas.

### **Gatekeepers/Fact Checkers**

News agencies have made several adjustments to navigate the fake news and media manipulations in the digital media landscape, which is primarily governed by algorithmic gatekeepers like search engines and social networks (Graves & Anderson, 2020). One of these adaptations is the creation of the “Share the facts” widget, a tool developed to increase the visibility of fact-checks within media networks that rely on algorithms. This widget aims to promote the adoption of a new data standard known as ClaimReview (Graves & Anderson, 2020). Due to the ease of sharing and the loss of trust in information that came with it, Facebook introduced a feature enabling users to flag posts containing misinformation (Khan & Idris, 2019). Additionally, Facebook collaborated with third-party fact-checkers such as Snopes, Factcheck.org, Associated Press, and PolitiFact to mitigate the spread of false information. However, despite these efforts, social media platforms still exhibit vulnerabilities and have a long way to go in effectively addressing misinformation online (Khan & Idris, 2019). It remains that individuals can play a major role in curbing the spread of misinformation. In the absence of traditional editorial oversight and given the influence of social media algorithms in the contemporary media landscape, individuals must rely on themselves and their social networks to

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consume and share information (Khan & Idris, 2019). Consequently, the interpretation and subsequent sharing of information on social media are shaped by individual subjectivity and bias.

The rise of the Internet and the widespread use of social media have led to notable changes, including a shift in influence from major media producers to individuals (Kahn & Idris, 2019). This era witnessed an unprecedented volume of online social sharing and growing concerns about the credibility of information. Not only the amount of sharing has seen unmatched growth, but the speed of sharing has also gotten to a point never before imagined (Kahn & Idris, 2019). Information can quickly go viral when it is shared and reshared across various social media channels. Studies found that approximately 59% of links on Twitter were shared by users without even reading the content they were sharing (Kahn & Idris, 2019).

It is crucial to emphasize that individuals are central to any initiatives aimed at combatting the spread of misinformation (Khan & Idris, 2019). False information and news frequently circulate on social media due to individuals sharing, retweeting, and propagating such content without verifying its accuracy. The sharing of misinformation by individuals can be influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors encompass audience subjectivity and bias, which subsequently affect information preferences (Khan & Idris, 2019). These internal factors often interact with external elements, including social media algorithms that determine the type of content a user encounters in their social feed, potentially leading to the formation of a filter bubble. A notable 60% of university students in Singapore were found to have shared misinformation (Khan & Idris, 2019).

Skepticism exhibited by social media users has the potential to reduce susceptibility to misinformation effects by prompting people to question the sources of information, and whether it eventually proves to be true or false (Khan & Idris, 2019). Interestingly, distrust can sometimes

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lead individuals to be more vigilant in their surroundings, ultimately resulting in positive outcomes. A survey revealed that nearly 60% of participants who used social media platforms did not routinely check the proper citation of sources (Khan & Idris, 2019). The same study indicated that, in assessing information quality, participants paid attention to the credibility of the source providing the information and relied on the reactions of others to gauge its authenticity. Individuals face growing challenges, including information overload, the rapid dissemination of news, and the increasing sophistication of fake news sources, making it difficult to distinguish reliable information from false reports.

Promoting users to counter false or misleading health information by presenting clear, evidence-backed counter-arguments and providing appropriate sources alongside their rebuttals would likely prove more effective in combating misinformation compared to relying solely on algorithms (Khan & Idris, 2019). Correcting misinformation may involve concise practices that emphasize facts and draw upon alternative sources of information. Four critical aspects were outlined to consider when verifying information: (i) authority (the credibility of the source and their characteristics), (ii) independent corroboration (the number of corroborating accounts from others), (iii) plausibility and support (the reasoning provided to support the information), and (iv) presentation (how the information is conveyed and the characteristics of the medium).

### **Development**

#### **Identity**

“Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995; 1 John 3:2*). Identity is a major stage in development. Media is a main contributing factor to identity formation in both discovering an identity through other

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methods of exploration and point of reference as well as the anonymity, miscommunications/misunderstandings, and judgments in how one is assessed through “likes” of their posts/pictures (Granic et al., 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021). Social media is a tool used in determining identity (Yau et al., 2019). All aspects of identity are vulnerable to social media from gender, clothes to wear, and character. Social networking sites (SNS) fulfill the human desire to align with significant social circles (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Young minds look to the media to see a reflection of themselves. They depend on the media to validate who they are (Turner, 2018). While interacting on SNS, people partake in social identification procedures, which encompass the creation and display of pertinent social affiliations. These social identities exert a noteworthy influence on users' attitudes and actions.

Identities are created online through content like pictures, experiences, and achievements (Bell, 2019; Shankleman et al., 2021). Pera et al. (2020) showed that identity was developed by growing the individual's self-recognition and creating positive relationships with others through the sharing of images on social media, giving them feelings of self-determination and personal growth. This growth in identity becomes their online self, which is adapted based on peer feedback. A part of online identity formation is done through social comparison. Social media has created this opportunity by opening two-way communication (Dodemaide et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2018). Being open to feedback opens the door to a dependency on it for self-esteem. Users depend on feedback from social media to heighten their self-esteem and well-being (Bell, 2019; Granic et al., 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021; Steele et al., 2020). Receiving multiple “Likes” on a picture can give feelings of instant gratification but can also lead to a decreased self-worth when there are not many “likes” received (Pera et al., 2020). To achieve more “likes” users create strategies and upload only during peak times, message friends to “like” their image, and

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after much editing. The danger is severely impacted when girls begin to expose more of their bodies with the sole purpose of getting more “likes” (Bell, 2019). Through different social media platforms subscribers post pictures of themselves and create stories of where they have been along with events they go to, but these pictures and stories are heavily edited to make sure they are showing the version of themselves they want others to see; not necessarily the real one (Bell, 2019; Granic et al., 2020; Pera et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2020). This persona is often taken at face value and believed to be true, leading to false ideas of who someone is, creating a personality they feel obliged to live up to. From here we see the vulnerability and the influence media has on development.

Authenticity is put into question as many images and posts are edited including texts that allow for time to create a message to be shared (Granic et al., 2020). They have also used it as a measuring stick to view their identity over time and the changes they went through. To assure their “true” selves, subscribers have said to polish anything they post to make sure it maintains their social media persona (Shankleman et al., 2021). Social media platforms have added easy editing tools for pictures that are uploaded (Bell, 2019). They also made the ease of creating, sharing, and responding to images fast, simple, and cheap. How one promotes themselves on social media through their photos is to show a part of themselves, but also a biased opinion on how they wish to be viewed (Pera et al., 2020). The Pera et al. (2020) study showed that images tend to be more trusted than text and that a photo is instantaneously seen as more real than a written text of the same thing.

Identity begins with values and beliefs from the home (Granic et al., 2020). It is around mid-adolescence that teens begin thinking for themselves about their interests and values first and seeing if they match with family and peers afterward, which is the groundwork for identity

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formation. With the onset of the digital age, society is growing in a world where dual identities are required, and one affects the other. Alongside the development of identity through biological health, maturation, and psychoanalytic aspects, there is also a need for an online identity (Gilmore, 2017). An issue that young adult users are running into is the identity they wish to share (Marquez et al., 2022; Yau et al., 2019). Often, two accounts are created, one for friends and the other for family. The reason is that sharing pictures of events, experiences, and where one has gone is not always acceptable to both groups (Yau et al., 2019). A college student would not want their parents to see pictures of them at a party late at night drinking alcohol, but they would want to share with friends. A new problem of negotiating their identity came into effect. Even within online identities, users need to manage their audiences. With social media being the tool to create, manage, and negotiate an online identity, users share content that matches this persona (Yau et al., 2019). As users can create their own identity of who they are, they can also use social media to learn about what is socially acceptable in another country or culture.

Online identities are a true but exaggerated version of their real-world selves (Bell, 2019; Pera et al., 2020). It can be adapted and adjusted to what they consider socially acceptable. Online identity is catered to by the feedback received from social media platforms. Managing identities between online and real life is not the only worry. Social media permits this opportunity to validate their identity through comments and feedback left by viewers, family, friends, or strangers. Friends assume a distinctive function as "co-performers" of the profile author's identity, engaging in activities like tagging them in photos, sharing messages, videos, and links to their profile, among other actions (Marquez et al., 2022). Facebook and Instagram are the main platforms used in questioning how to position the online self as they offer peer feedback (Huang & Chang, 2020). These two platforms were seen to complement each other as

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positive posts were shared with acquaintances on Facebook and negative emotions were shared with close friends on Instagram. The study by Huang and Chang (2020) identified the aspects considered when choosing social media platforms to be media traits, social factors, and situational factors. It offers substantial opportunity for self-exploration in discovering one's identity in all domains (ex. academic, national, romantic) due to the immense number of potential connections and the fact it is a large part of daily routines, even several times a day (Vincent & Lannegrand, 2022). The online image of oneself ultimately gains acceptance through the approval and acknowledgment of others (Marquez et al., 2022). This environment fosters a culture reminiscent of celebrities, where teenagers are acquiring knowledge and imitating aspects of macro-celebrity digital culture. Making decisions on who one is based on feedback from peers is a fragile frame to build the self. Therefore, it must be remembered that "As iron sharpens iron, so man sharpens his fellow man" (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995, Proverbs 27:17*).

Technology surged the development of identity but also brought about more threats (Uysal et al., 2020). In helping to create an individual's identity, it also helps create a group identity that, depending on the leadership and the group ideation, can be potentially harmful in the offline actions that come from this. Group membership is a fundamental aspect of identity and well-being (Lawson et al., 2023). People derive their self-esteem not only from their attributes but also from their affiliation with specific groups. The temporarily expanding the boundaries of the self (TEBOTS) model suggests that connecting with mediated characters offers individuals a break from the constant effort of upholding their identity (Hall, 2019). It also enhances empathy and comprehension of individuals from marginalized groups. However, there are potential negative consequences as well. For instance, emerging research suggests that identifying with a story protagonist who engages in violent actions can lead to moral

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disengagement, which may ultimately result in greater acceptance of unethical behavior in the real world (Hall, 2019).

Inclusion into an online social media group bubble (online social group, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic) has been shown to help combat feelings of being alone (Latikka et al., 2022). Belonging to these groups fulfills essential psychological and social needs, including the fundamental desire for social inclusion, granting access to resources, fostering a sense of collective influence, and even offering reproductive advantages (Lawson et al., 2023). Not adhering to the established norms within a group can result in social repercussions for a group member, including less social engagement or expulsion from the group. This kind of encounter is generally distressing for most individuals and has adverse effects on the psychological well-being of the excluded member.

Millennials are thought of as a gender-fluid generation, but they still have struggles with their online gender identity (Kondakciu et al., 2021). The judgment received after posting content guides those in search of their identity. Social media gives the space to experiment and express themselves and is a main reason for the growth of gender/sexuality awareness (Kondakciu et al., 2021). It is possible to realign your identity based on your gender in a digital domain and is much easier to do than in real life. There are also many more comments to support their identity; something that would not happen in real life. A digital community offers a new arena for individuals to create themselves (Kondakciu et al., 2021). Some have even said it permits them to have an opportunity to show their true selves (Shankleman et al., 2021). It provides a safe place to explore one's identity in terms of gender and sexuality and the LGBTQ community has been taking advantage of this (Allen et al., 2021; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020). Transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse (TNG) community members frequently express their

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exploration of identities and communities on the internet. They also have different motivations for media use. Research on cisgender (the gender one is born with) youth links heightened digital technology usage with feelings of isolation and a decline in body image (Allen et al., 2021).

Children form gender stereotypes at a very young age, and studies suggest that media serves as a potent channel through which young children acquire societal norms concerning gender-related conduct and appearance (Harriger et al., 2021). Media can also work in a negative aspect in perpetuating stereotypes of races, genders, cultures, and all other areas where societal divisions are made (Dogan et al., 2022; Salk et al., 2020). Rigid adherence to conventional masculine standards has been linked to adverse consequences for men's overall health and welfare. These consequences encompass substance abuse, diminished willingness to seek assistance, impaired mental health, as well as higher rates of suicide and depressive disorders (Harriger et al., 2021; Salk et al., 2020).

There are four strategies used by media subscribers to share their online gender identity: empowering, keeping it real, bracketing, and online masking (Kondakciu et al., 2021). Empowering is for a purpose (usually gender equality), keeping it real is staying true to their “true” self, bracketing involves select content they wish to share on a specific platform and audience, and online masking is what occurs when a user feels they have to hide who they are to some while being open to others (not posting their gender identity public as some will approve while others will be upset). A study by Kondakciu et al. (2021) demonstrated how authenticity was a focal point in sharing one’s gender identity online. During their research, the authors found that aspects related to identifying gender were frequently de-emphasized, and hidden, and were possibly specifically chosen to share gender elements. Subscribers put in much time and effort to construct their online identity that coincides with their offline identity (Bell, 2019). Results of a

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study by Vincent and Lannegrand (2022) and a separate one by Wang and Gu (2019) supported that individuals who use social media frequently tend to have a stronger sense of security in their online identity. Furthermore, the findings suggested a link between the emotions experienced on social media and a reassessment of one's identity.

Identity is related to online gaming in various ways, but a particular one is an online avatar, which is a digital representation of the player. The development of identity through social media and online videogame avatars has been noted in multiple studies (Allen et al., 2021; Burt, I., 2018; Dogan et al., 2021; Gray, K., 2018; Harriger et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2023; Salk et al., 2020; Vaid & Harari, 2021). Attachment to this avatar is not always temporary and is also used as a buffer against negative influences (Qi et al., 2023). Based on one's social development, this avatar can be linked to their self-concept, and this makes the player more vulnerable to gaming addiction by an increased desire to lose themselves in their avatar. An explanation of this is the self-discrepancy theory, a view of the self as the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self (Qi et al., 2023). These different self-views are a fundamental premise in identity development that can instigate internal conflict of who one wants to or should be, and who they really are. Identity has both the actual self and the desired self.

The concept of linear temporality suggests that gamers align themselves with their avatar as it gives them a sense of fulfillment over time (Rapp, 2022). As the character/avatar is made to be endlessly modifiable, the instant gratification from new equipment and increased skill/power for the avatar, lends to momentary satisfaction and continuous desires, all while escaping boredom and frustration. A player who is also a member of the LBGTQ+ community can use the digital realm as an opportunity to explore different traits of their personality that may not be possible in real life (Gray, 2018). However, they must also deal with online discrimination

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similar to real-world situations. Using their avatars, some players may select a different gender and persona to express themselves freely without worry of judgment. Even if discrimination is present, the player can always disconnect or fight back as the online gaming world offers them anonymity. Exploring adds a feature of connection to the avatar when questioning identity and exploring safe ways to develop it (Gray, 2018).

Researchers have explained exploration as turning the experience from the third person to the first person (Gray, 2018). Results from a study by Qi et al. (2023) have shown that this relation to an avatar is linked to a lower cognitive level, demonstrates the impact of virtual-world experience on real-world performance, and has a role in game design and social VR applications; showing the dangers of how it can lead to an addiction.

As social media plays its role in identity, the Bible should dictate the ultimate direction. Social media is a tool, but it should be manipulated by the Word of the Lord. The Bible already supports the idea behind group gatherings and social interactions facilitating relationships: “We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995; Hebrews 10:24-25*). God plans to have us support one another, including our feedback - “No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995; Ephesians 4:29*).

Hashemi et al. (2020) had significant findings that linked religious identity with psychological well-being. The findings also showed that there was a social connectedness with ethnic communities, perceived discrimination, and social support that came from the link between religious identity and psychological well-being. Religious group members have a

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stronger image of themselves and a feeling of meaning, which leads to a more positive attitude with increased confidence (Hashemi et al. (2020).

### **Development**

Gutenberg standardized the distribution of knowledge and information, created modern-day media, and increased liberty and equality (it was not only the Church who oversaw this anymore) (Shapiro, 2018). But this also led to more isolated ideas. Before this, media was through oral communication only and was the majority in groups. Printing led to individual reading.

The social comparison theory asserts that individuals naturally strive to evaluate their competence and achievements by comparing themselves to others (Vaid & Harari, 2021). The outcomes of these comparisons influence one's self-perception and overall well-being. Modern media grants instant access to a wide range of content, including information, music, TV shows, films, video games, and digital social interactions. As a result, individuals who frequently engage with modern Internet media may grow accustomed to swift feedback, potentially hindering the development of impulse control and patience (Ra et al., 2018). Results from a study by Vaid and Harari (2021) indicated that personality traits provide a valuable theoretical foundation for comprehending the inherent tendencies influencing daily social media usage.

Studies showed that parents viewed media in three primary ways: a) as a means of distraction to offer relief in child-rearing, b) as a babysitter when they could not attend to their children, and c) as a tool for shaping their children's behavior (Nikken, 2019). While approximately 20 to 30 percent found media effective as a modifier or babysitter, only around 10 percent considered media helpful as a distraction. In cross-sectional research, increased social media usage has been associated with reduced sleep quality, decreased academic performance,

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limited outdoor play, and decreased emotional well-being in adolescents and young adults (Das-Friebel et al., 2020; Vaid & Harari, 2021). Parents play a crucial role in shaping how children utilize media technologies and the impact of media on their development (Nikken, 2019). A child raised by the media will grow up to be a parent who uses the media to babysit. Therefore, parents can purposefully employ various strategies while guiding their children, including limiting their media consumption, watching their online activities, engaging in active mediation, enjoying media together for leisure, and closely overseeing their media usage (Nikken, 2019).

The constant availability of screen devices allows their unrestricted use to elevate the likelihood that children will engage more with media as they mature. Studies have shown four key themes that relate to development stages: connection, identity, learning, and emotions that match with attachment, identity, attention, and emotional regulation (Shankleman et al., 2021). These are features they associate with their well-being and connection to social media.

### ***Social Behavior***

Media is a source of storytelling, whether it is the news, information/knowledge, or history (Shapiro, 2018). Bandura's social learning theory posits that children learn through observation, imitation, and modeling behaviors (Smith, 2021). He goes on to mention how cognition and the environment interact with each other in development.

Multiple research studies have established a connection between socio-emotional and moral factors like empathy, the employment of moral disengagement strategies, and the act of engaging in cyberbullying (Falla et al., 2023). It has also been seen to increase social behavior in real life with more opportunities to create friendships by managing their shyness (Shankleman et al., 2021). Socio-emotional development through Internet media could build intimacy, popularity, and social standing.

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Attachment theory is a core aspect of developing social skills. From this, expectations on interactions are learned as to how to maintain a relationship (Barbaro, 2020; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Research shows connections between secure attachment in improved social skills in adolescents and is related to developing negotiation skills, receiving critiques, and the knowledge to give positive feedback (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Avoidant attachment has been seen to be associated with increased online social presence as it is less confrontational and more comfortable to grow online relationships.

Attachment theory is a lifelong framework for understanding relationships throughout life (Barbaro, 2020; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; McClean et al., 2021). The two main relationships concerned are infant-parent and adult romantic relationships (Barbaro, 2020). Reactive attachment disorder (RAD) in children manifests as emotional withdrawal from caregivers and/or disruptions in social interactions. Consequently, they exhibit inappropriate prosocial behavior and face the potential for later-life psychopathological risks (Cuyvers et al., 2020). Lack of a healthy attachment in childhood is often a precursor to RAD and other mental health problems. The children do not seek nor respond to comfort, do not have appropriate social or emotional skills, and have difficulty controlling their emotions (Makita et al., 2020). However, attachment theory in practice in the home can develop leadership skills throughout life. A secure attachment through a close relationship creates transformational leadership behaviors that are seen in the workspace (McClean et al., 2021).

### ***Self-Regulation***

Social media consumption can lead to emotional exhaustion through ostracism (Ali et al., 2023). Emotional exhaustion is seen throughout studies on identity and social media (Hernandez et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2021; Vincent & Lannegrand, 2021). Emotional exhaustion is an

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underlying concept to the current research on emotional regulation as it can have a lasting effect on socio-emotional development and the cause is Internet media (Carpendale et al., 2023; Cuyvers et al., 2020).

Childhood social and emotional skills are acknowledged as learnable abilities that impact well-being and development throughout a person's life (Carpendale et al., 2023; Wilson & Stock, 2021). These competencies, now seen as crucial for enhancing mental health and overall well-being, have a well-established role as precursors to various developmental outcomes. These outcomes include academic achievement, behavioral issues, social interactions, and mental health.

Utilizing media as a form of reward or punishment is believed to yield short-term effectiveness but does not contribute to long-term emotional self-regulation skills in children (Nikken, 2019). Instead, employing screens in this manner may foster a transactional dynamic between the child and parent and fail to promote the cultivation of their intrinsic motivation. Existing research indicates that social-emotional skills are adaptable and can be cultivated and nurtured in students, resulting in enhanced developmental outcomes (Carpendale et al., 2023).

Online miscommunications are a possible root of paranoia and anxiety. Some have mentioned that a lack of response to their postings left them feeling neglected (Shankleman et al., 2021). Others said to felt frustration, paranoia, and loneliness as they were excluded from group activities while they saw pictures of friends together without them. These feelings have a direct link to self-esteem. Before posting a picture, online subscribers question themselves and the “self” they are displaying. As important is the feedback from these pictures where users self-evaluate based on the replies (Shankleman et al., 2021). A lack of a reply sends a message just the same as many internalize this to mean they are “ugly.” Comments are quantified by the

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number of “likes” a picture receives even though there is no set standard for how many results in a positive picture, it often negatively affects their self-worth. Every time a post is made, the status is updated, or a picture is uploaded, the uploader can feel a sense of pressure from peers (Shankleman et al., 2021). Self-esteem is based on the number of likes received; too little led to embarrassment and shame, and what was considered a lot led to a boost in self-image.

Dependency, addiction, and compulsion were all behaviors linked to social media (Shankleman, 2021; Vaid & Harari, 2021). Social media has graphic images and texts, such as suicide, that give a sense of feeling down or guilty for not helping.

In helping to manage these sensations and facilitate self-regulation, the collaboration for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL) framework has defined five competencies based on evidence to focus on (Carpendale et al., 2023):

1. Self-attachment: This involves the capacity to identify emotions and maintain a self-assured attitude grounded in a realistic self-assessment.
2. Self-management: It pertains to effectively handling one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to prevent them from interfering with current tasks.
3. Social awareness: This skill revolves around recognizing and comprehending the emotions of others and engaging appropriately with diverse groups.
4. Relationship skills (also referred to as social management): These encompass the ability to establish and sustain healthy, fulfilling relationships through effective communication and cooperation.
5. Responsible decision-making: This involves the capability to make considerate, constructive, and well-informed decisions regarding one's actions and personal conduct.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

#### **Religion**

A worldview is a comprehensive structure of one's fundamental convictions regarding anything that can be a subject of belief and must be shaped and tested by Scripture (Wolters, 2005). In the search for the truth of a Christian worldview, we know that it emanates from God and His act of bringing the world into existence. It is unveiled through His word, the Bible, and His creations, which encompass the natural order found within it. God is the Creator of the world, and scripture is our instruction to live in it. This understanding puts into perspective the significant and enduring point of contention among Christians, which has been and remains the suitable connection between Christians and popular media (Sheldon, 2020). He is also the source of media, as said in Philippians 4:9 “Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you” and 2 Timothy 3:16–17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995*). The study on the intersection of religion and media reveals that scholars in the sociology of religion, despite having a well-established theoretical foundation, largely ignored the implications of mediated communication (Cheng & Yorgason, 2022). Negative media brings about the verse from Romans 1:18 “The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995*).

Conversely, researchers in mass communication tended to either underestimate religion, considering it as a trivial, unimportant, or declining aspect of sociocultural life or approach it cautiously due to its perceived subjectivity and irrationality (Chen & Yorgason, 2022). As

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Christians, we acknowledge that the Scriptures hold the authority of God, surpassing public opinion, media influence, and all the influential forces in our culture that continuously mold our perspective. Given that many of these forces intentionally disregard and openly reject the supreme authority of Scripture, there exists significant pressure on Christians to confine their acknowledgment of Scripture's authority to the domains of the church, theology, and personal ethics (Wolters, 2005). This limitation has essentially diminished its relevance to the broader direction of culture and society. Most media influences regarded religion as a fixed variable, failing to recognize its significance as a cultural phenomenon. Media transformed religion from a personal matter into a public sphere (Chen & Yorgason, 2022). The church bears the duty of spreading the kingdom's message and ensuring its dissemination (Wolters, 2005).

"Media elites" are generally less religious than the broader population, and they also tend to hold more progressive social and political views (Cheng & Yorgason, 2022; Sheldon, 2020). These "media elites" lead to a perceived "liberal bias" against religion in the media. Guidelines for journalists on how to handle matters related to religion were set in place (Chen & Yorgenson, 2022), which brings the relevance of 1 Corinthians 10:23, "Everything is lawful, but not everything is beneficial" (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995*). The significance of media in our lives is deeply ingrained in human imagination and behavior, suggesting that media can assume a quasi-religious function in our daily existence (Chen & Yorgenson, 2022). Out of concerns about the (im)moral impact that this mass medium could exert on viewers, religious organizations quickly took on the role of monitoring the industry with the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLD) taking the lead (Sheldon, 2020). Although, economic factors hindered significant Christian participation in the production of films, even Christmas movies refrained from Biblical references and replaced Christian symbols with secular ones (Christ for Santa

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Claus) (Eide, 2020). Messages of consumerism reign and the characters are shown in a positive light when believing in Santa Claus; again, with no mention of Christ. The triumph of "The Passion of the Christ" in 2004 was regarded as a pivotal example through which mass media producers rediscovered the influence of the evangelical Christian consumer market (Cheng & Yorgason, 2022; Sheldon, 2020). It's crucial to acknowledge the ideological influence of media, particularly cinema, in shaping moral values and ideologies. Even Christian media content frequently carries significant yet subtle emphasized political messages.

Megachurches are joining forces with media and using special guests and athletes to come to mass, although it is no traditional mass (Kidwell & Boer, 2021). At these megachurches, mass is an event with light shows, celebrity guests, and popular music with a live band. They are using celebrity ideation by creating a spectacle and purposefully making the pastor inaccessible with closed doors to the public all to attract more churchgoers. Technology and media are used to create a sense of a celebrity persona around the pastor, and as (North) American society places importance on fame, the audience feels as though they are in a rock concert watching the singer pass by (Kidwell & Boer, 2021). The question remains, is religion adapting to media because of the influence it has over people or media with its sights on taking over religion as well?

### **Division**

Civil authority is an inherent aspect of the natural order, and the establishment of the state is a divine ordinance (Wolters, 2005). God's governance is direct in the non-human domain but operates through intermediaries in the realm of culture and society. While the U.S. Constitution officially maintains a separation between church and state and forbids any religious prerequisites for holding public office, most U.S. presidents have identified themselves as Christians, and

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historical presidential speeches have frequently incorporated religious terminology (Allen et al., 2021).

Many studies have delved into how social media impacts the polarization of people's beliefs, especially in terms of the intensity and extremeness of political opinions or where individuals position themselves on the left-to-right political spectrum (Charron & Annoni, 2021; Sheldon, 2020). The cognitive authority theory posits that in situations where information is imprecise and lacking, the impact of content ideology on opinion polarization may become more pronounced (Sun et al., 2023). The polarization is because there is less contextual information available to users/viewers regarding the main event. Consequently, readers are more inclined to experience cognitive polarization due to their pre-existing beliefs and one-sided perspectives. Although some influential research suggests that these platforms contribute to increased polarization, recent empirical findings contradict this notion (Charron & Annoni, 2021). As a result, there is an ongoing debate surrounding this connection.

The fact that over 70% of Americans and over 80% of Republican-leaning voters think that social networking sites deliberately censor viewpoints they disagree with demonstrates a division (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Numerous occasions have seen politicians and commentators expressing criticism. They allege that social networking sites excessively restrict freedom of expression to promote a particular political agenda (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Online hostility is detrimental as it cultivates division and erodes trust.

As Christians, we need to live in a “group” society that is inclusive. Scriptures articulate in straightforward human terms the principles of God's law (Wolters, 2005). A fundamental division within the Christian faith lies in the idea that a Christian's allegiance is to the Kingdom of God rather than the secular "world." God's directives, ethical principles, and concepts might

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conflict with those of governments or other individuals (Sheldon, 2020). Consequently, Christians are instructed to “obey God rather than men” (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995; Acts 5:29*). Christians are called to resist any type of authoritarianism, where an institution assumes authority between God and His followers, whether it be within the church, government, or media (Wolters, 2005). The Western civilization undeniably finds itself undergoing a detrimental trend towards secularization.

### **Free Will**

One of the first forms of media was the Bible. Unlike media today though, in its origin, media was used to communicate and share information. The Bible was used to share God’s love and His message to us all. Spreading His Word was the idea behind the media and writing history down to share it with younger generations (Sheldon, 2020). From hate to sexuality to outright nonsense, a platform is not only given for this but also acknowledgment as people respond to these messages/comments in their feedback. Even if in complete disagreement, by replying to pointless opinions, we give them value. Some philosophers suggest that viewpoints opposing the idea of free will should be withheld from the public, as eroding people's belief in free will might have dire consequences, causing individuals to relinquish self-control and engage in immoral behaviors (Genschow et al., 2021). Conversely, some philosophers contend that not subscribing to the concept of free will could yield positive outcomes, encouraging people to move away from flawed retribution-based ethics and unrealistic notions of a perfectly just world (Genschow et al., 2021).

Paul said it depreciates God's good gifts. "Which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" and "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated

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by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5), including free will (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). Paul also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:19 "Although I am free regarding all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). This verse goes on to mention how Paul altered himself to become someone pleasing to the person he was with at the time, for the sake of the Gospel, so he could be part of the Gospel. In creating a self-admired by all, saying and doing whatever pleases them, the gift of free will is lost as they become slaves to what others want.

On November 23, 2018, Canadian journalist Meghan Murphy faced a permanent ban from Twitter (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). This occurred following her postings about how society should approach transgenderism, where she asserted that "men aren't women" and raised questions about the distinctions between a man and a transgender woman. She also used male pronouns when referring to a transgender individual identifying as a woman. Twitter regarded these statements as hateful speech due to their perceived derogatory nature towards someone based on their gender identity. This case highlights the significant role that social networking sites (SNS) play in either advancing or impeding the exercise of the right to freedom of speech. Academics have highlighted the social obligation of social networking sites to uphold and encourage free speech (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020).

When feeling as though the freedom to choose is threatened, this could lead to psychological resistance. Cognitive neuroscientists have put forth the notion that free will could potentially be merely a deceptive concept (Genschow et al., 2021). These perspectives challenging the existence of free will have not only gained popularity within academic circles but have also become more prominent in the mainstream media. The challenge to free will leads to the question of whether individuals believe in it or not (Genschow et al., 2021).

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Free will beliefs and attributions are founded on the insights that an individual's actions provide into their character (Chen et al., 2023). Actions that seem to flow from a person's character, such as wearing a band T-shirt or deciding to start skipping or jumping spontaneously, are typically perceived as relatively free choices. Conversely, behaviors that are driven by societal conventions, like obeying a parent's or teacher's instruction, tend to be viewed as not a choice. Friedrich Nietzsche argued that free will is a false belief imposed on humans by theologians to hold them accountable for their conduct and existence (Chen et al., 2023).

Research in self-determination theory (SDT) demonstrates that experiencing a sense of self-determination in one's actions, as opposed to feeling controlled or pressured, significantly impacts mental well-being (Sheldon & Goffredi, 2021). The concept of free will essentially hinges on the capacity to generate different choices, pick one of them, and pursue it as a goal. If this holds, then free will is objectively accessible to all individuals, regardless of whether they are aware of it or not (Sheldon & Goffredi, 2021).

Organismic integration theory (OIT) states that people's innate desire to engage in an activity can be diminished when external rewards and pressures are made available too frequently (Sheldon & Titova, 2023). For instance, individuals who are paid to play football tend to lose their inherent motivation to do so voluntarily. Consequently, during a subsequent free choice period, such participants are more inclined to play golf instead of football. Additional research uncovered identified motivation, which is a self-driven motivation where one's actions align with their internalized values, even if the task itself is not something that is enjoyed (Sheldon & Titova, 2023). These motivations are related to improved performance, enhanced mood, and increased satisfaction. There is also introjected motivation, which is a controlled form of motivation where one obliges oneself to act in a certain way to avoid feelings of guilt or self-

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criticism (Sheldon & Titova, 2023). In a sense, the specific nature of the activity might be less important than the sense of autonomy and choice individuals feel while engaging in it.

The effects of sin have so thoroughly distorted human cognitive abilities that they are incapable of perceiving God's intentions (Wolters, 2005). To feel autonomous, or that they are making their own decisions, one must feel that the cause of their behavior is due to what they have chosen to do (Sheldon & Titova, 2023). Individuals tend to advocate for freedom of speech primarily for statements that align with their views (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). Personal convictions significantly influence how people assess what should be safeguarded under the freedom of speech. The concept of free will is a fundamental pillar of our society and has a far-reaching impact on almost every aspect of our lives. It influences our perspectives on morality, politics, public policy, personal relationships, and our methods of administering rewards and punishments (Genschow et al., 2021). Most of what defines our human existence relies on our perception of each other as independent individuals capable of making choices freely. Most people believe in free will (Genschow et al., 2021).

### **Treatment**

A main aspect of Christianity is caring for thy neighbor. With the rise in media use, treatment for overconsumption of media is an area of increased demand (Bettmann et al., 2020). A patient's degree of loneliness/depression, impulse control, social connectedness, and reason for the use of media (ex, distraction, communication) needs to be considered along with their media use for treatment (Bettmann et al., 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019). A recommendation made by clinicians is to heighten the quality of media viewed (Steele et al., 2020). Instead of senseless TikTok videos, use media (including social media) to research and learn about a topic of interest, creativity, communication, or getting involved with a cause. Using media of any type

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at an early age has shown links to alterations in the brain's reactions to social settings affecting social engagement (Maza et al., 2023). Awareness of the vulnerabilities in the digital realm will keep caregivers alert to the situation and motivate them to monitor and interact with the child's online presence (Koehler et al., 2023; Salk et al., 2020).

### Summary

Previous studies have shown that media in different formats can impact society (ex. violent games and movies are related to violent behavior), but awareness of this is scarce. Recognition of the problems is relatively new and best-practice treatments are still needed. Internet media is on the rise with billions of active users and 90% of Americans and 96% of the UK are connected (Bell, 2019; Bettmann et al., 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021). Research has shown that these numbers grew to this point by users satisfying personal needs and establishing two-way communication with media through feedback.

Multiple benefits have been discovered with identity exploration, increased communication, bypassing obstacles from mental issues like social anxiety, and increasing well-being. Disadvantages have been noted as well in the form of addiction, cyberbullying, the impact of negative feedback on self-esteem, a link between increased consumption and depression, and the lack of gatekeepers to verify information with "fake news" and information from experts. Persuasion was established to shape beliefs, attitudes, and actions as well as specified techniques used by marketing agencies and media alike in an attempt to perfect persuasion (Morrison et al., 2020; Silva & Silva, 2010; Tchernev et al., 2021). The onset of social media and the transformation of passive one-way to actively two-way communication has lost control of the spread of information and its validity. It has also enhanced the narrative processing as well as

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eased the shaping of the narrative while confusing the distinction between fact and falsehood. All this influences political views and votes.

Along with this is a Biblical worldview on media and how it has manipulated its way into occupying a great deal of time, energy, and focus of society. The abundance of media in society's lives enables Internet media to spread the message of its choice, but that has separated itself from religion. The morality of media is questioned when seen through a Christian worldview. Free will is challenged and divisions are made between Church and state as well as within groups. An example of this is how it creates stereotypes that divide (Allen et al., 2021). As Christians, we follow God, but the media follows a secular way, which leads to the necessity of treatment methods to help with addiction and also a healthier media literacy. With corruption, false information, and blatant attempts at persuasion, the media is responsible for noting history for future generations. In better understanding of Internet media's influence permits caregivers to have the tools needed to intervene (Bettmann et al., 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019; Koehler et al., 2023; Salk et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2020).

Chapter 3 will demonstrate the method that was used to identify and emphasize the need for Internet media recognition. How participants were recruited, their specifics are shared, and the method of data gathering, and data analysis will be outlined. The assumptions and limitations of the study will be discussed as well.

### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

#### **Overview**

A description of the methods used and the methods that were followed for the study is presented below. In pursuing a better understanding of the influence of Internet media, I used a qualitative approach to complement the existing quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews were given to young adults, and the data was pooled to record patterns and reoccurring themes.

Chapter 3 will discuss all the aspects of how the study took place. The first step was the recruitment of participants, followed by the procedure outlining how the study would be completed, and data retrieved. The materials will be discussed, including the coding of the interviews. The data was gathered, and the method for data analysis was shared. Finally, the delimitations, assumptions, and limitations that were expected of the study are reviewed.

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do the experiences of college students with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding social behavior developmental delays?

RQ 2: How do the experiences of college students with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding identity developmental delays?

RQ 3: How do the experiences of college students with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding self-regulation of emotional developmental delays?

#### **Research Design**

The research design chosen in this research is best described as "Grounded Theory Lite." This approach, as recently developed for smaller-scale studies, involves using emergent data, and conducting line-by-line coding. However, it does not include the iterative rounds of interviews and theoretical sampling required by a comprehensive grounded theory framework (Servant-

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Miklos & Noordzij, 2021). This type of qualitative study was not often used in studies determining different aspects of influence, Internet media, and/or development (Dogan et al., 2021; Punyanunt-Carter, 2018; Rice et al., 2018). The majority of data I was able to review for research was quantitative data.

Grounded theory lite is often used over grounded theory as it is a more concise version (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). The aim is to gain an initial grasp of the topic by developing categories and concepts and exploring how they relate to each other, rather than creating a formal theory (Servant-Miklos & Noordzij, 2021). This approach aligns well with the limited size and scope of my research. The grounded theory lite design was used as my research aimed at laying a foundation and exploring the area of Internet media influence for future research. Also, time and resources were limited, and the study was smaller and had fewer participants (Malterud et al., 2016). The tight integration of data collection and analysis serves as a safeguard against preconceived notions about the topic.

The chosen design will help understand why a particular media channel is selected (fulfilling what need), if and how Internet media influenced decision-making in social and socio-emotional development, and to what extent it did, as well as if the participant was aware of this. Conducting interviews allows for a complete explanation of the questions and allows the participant to explain their answers. Collecting direct data from participants who are a demographic of heavy users will permit the study to discover and understand the extent to which Internet media influences social and socio-emotional development (in the form of behavior, identity, and self-regulation of emotions).

### **Participants**

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The study took place in Quebec, Canada; therefore, the participants were taken from the same geographic area and shared a middle-class socioeconomic status. For the participants to be eligible, they were 18 to 32 years old. Exclusion criteria included a clinical diagnosis of any disorder, having ever struggled with identity since birth, or having ever experienced events of trauma that significantly altered one's life. Gender indication was to ensure no prior struggle with their identity, which may influence Internet media consumption and no prior diagnosis or trauma to ensure no other reasoning for the data obtained. Identifying these factors ensured that no pre-existing individualized traits influenced the participants' media use.

Following a delay in response from Champlain College, participants were recruited through an invitation given by word of mouth. The invitation asked for their participation in an interview about their Internet media use and life habits. There were also two moral/ethical questions to get insight into their decision-making process. The participants replied to the invitations, where they were advised that it was voluntary and that their information would remain confidential.

I initially interviewed ten randomly selected participants for semi-structured interviews but continued with three more to reach data saturation. This study began with ten participants for the semi-structured interviews as previous research in grounded theory stated that after ten interviews and three consecutive interviews with no new data, saturation was reached (Francis et al., 2010). Research by Hennick and Kaiser (2022) showed that saturation is reached between 9 to 17 interviews and stated that doing more interviews than is necessary causes ethical concerns. The study also mentions that reviews from textbooks on qualitative research methodology say 5 to 60 interviews are needed to reach saturation, but these recommendations are not empirically based. Research on sample size has also stated that there is no clearly defined method for

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determining sample quantity (Mocanasu, 2020; Staller, 2021; Vasileiou et al., 2018). The main factor in determining sample size is that it will be representative of the population. As the sample pool is relatively small, there is little diversity, and the interview questions are highly focused, the study began with ten interviews and continued until saturation and representation were reached. Previous studies in grounded theory in media have used just over ten participants (10-20, with an average of 14), but these studies had a much larger sample pool, age range, and diversity (Dhir et al., 2021; Heckemann et al., 2022; Kuo et al., 2022; Perks, 2019; Peters, 2023; Taneja et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2023).

### **Study Procedures**

While waiting for permission from the college to proceed with recruitment, I was approached by multiple employees of the college who expressed their desire to participate in the study. They discovered I was conducting research and was experiencing a delay in a decision from the college. I explained my research, and the reason for the study, and advised them how they could volunteer to be involved. Participants were advised that all information would be confidential and that they could decline to participate in the study at any time before their answers were recorded and stored (Appendix A).

The research had a grounded theory lite approach. The value of media, including its power, was assessed through the research process (Wu et al., 2019). The aim was to learn more about the influence Internet media has on the decision-making process and social and socio-emotional development for exploring the area of Internet media effect. The effects of Internet media are different for everyone-and were noted throughout the research to evaluate in order to demonstrate the impact media has on specific areas of development.

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Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth. The aim was to see to what extent the Internet media has on them; therefore, it was desired to find Internet media users of different amounts (high/medium/low use). The verbal invitation advised of the inclusion and exclusion criteria previously mentioned. The invitation included inclusive and exclusive questions (Appendix A). Once the selection was completed and before the interviews began, the participants were given a full explanation of the study, its' aim, and its desired purpose. They were also informed that their information would remain confidential as no names would be requested at the interview and that they may drop out of the interview processes at any time. After the interview, participants were given a debriefing to advise them of the next steps in the research process.

Throughout the research, the amount of time spent on media and its effects on development were determined. The interviews asked the same media-type questions (amount of time spent on media and type of media) to each participant but had the flexibility to question further their decisions made based on their answers when dealing with questions on influence.

Interviews were held with each participant and covered the same questions. Participants gave different examples and the number of times their decisions were affected by media, which was coded for discovering similarities within the participants and for overall data. Aside from the straightforward examples the participant may or may not have been influenced, a series of mixed questions (both open and closed) were asked to discover possible times this happened on an unconscious level. The flexibility of the interview took place at this point. Based on the participants' answers, the questions were adjusted to determine their decision-making habits (buying habits, voting, consumption, and any other behavior based on their decisions).

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Interviews took between twenty to thirty minutes and were centered around media and lifestyle habits.

Each interview was recorded on a personal recording device that is password-protected. These recordings were used for the data analysis, and Microsoft Excel to create the spreadsheet. Data was continuously evaluated from previous research and interview information to adapt to each situation. All results were coded and based on a predetermined code that was mutually agreed upon with a separate researcher. This mutual agreement ensured the data's validity and reliability.

Explanatory data was collected to search for connections between media, influence, and social or socio-emotional development. Common themes were grouped and coded based on their main context. The codes related to answers from interview questions (media use, purpose of use, reasoning behind decision making, low/medium/high percentage of name brands, number of known celebrities vs. known academics). Appendix B lists the fixed semi-structured interview questions.

All participants were advised that the questioning could stop at any time, and they could drop out of the study at any point. Confidentiality was maintained; names were not attached to the interviews, and they were known as participant numbers. The study requested IRB permission.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

#### **Materials**

The materials needed for the study were minimal. The interviews were voice-recorded with a hand-held recording device. Once the data was gathered from the interviews, they were

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entered into a spreadsheet to show, code, compare, and accumulate the results of each participant. Interviews were held in a private.

### ***Recruitment***

An initial request was sent to the Research Coordinator at Champlain College – Lennoxville to acquire volunteer participants at Champlain College (Appendix D). The request was to send an invitation that would have been the first assessment to recruit and determine students who could participate. It would have recognized the eligibility criteria; between the ages of 18 to 24, have no prior diagnoses, have no prior traumatic events, and identify as male or female. The invitation explained the purpose and process of the study. It also mentioned the inclusion and exclusion criteria and how the answers would remain confidential. The purpose was to recruit students who meet the inclusion criteria, inform the students of the reason for the study, and assure them that the data would remain confidential.

While waiting for the request to be confirmed, I spoke with employees at the college and explained that I was doing a study to complete my PhD, and there was a long delay in the response from the college. Many showed an interest and requested to partake in the study with their partner. The same information regarding the study that would have been sent in the invitation to the students (Appendix D) was shared with them. The age range was then extended to 18 to 32, and the participants were altered from college students to young adults.

### ***Interview***

Once a sample of participants was determined, semi-structured interviews were held. These interviews determined the Internet media use, frequency, and decision-making process of these young adults. The questions (Appendix B) were separated into five different categories: use and attachment, social behavior, identity, influence, and socio-emotional regulation. The six use

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and attachment questions helped situate the participants regarding media use and attachment to see if there was a link with the rate they are influenced. The five social behavior questions determined the participant's social development to date and checked against their media habits. There were five questions on identity to see if media was used in its development. The five questions on influence helped me understand how much the participants relied on Internet media for daily tasks. Finally, the four socio-emotional questions determined the degree of regulation the participants had. As they were semi-structured interviews, all participants were asked the same questions and given possible answers to choose from but were allowed to expound their answers.

### *Coding*

A coding sheet (Appendix C) was created, and based on this, the participant's answers were referenced with the categories. The aim was to discover the reasoning for media selection, frequency, and their general decision-making process and search for any reoccurring topics, patterns, or links. Also, to give insight into whether and how their decision-making process matches social and socio-emotional developmental factors. I produced the coding template and then it was reevaluated by a second non-partisan researcher to ensure a mutual understanding and agreeance of the codes was determined. A word bubble and spreadsheet were generated to record the answers and verify common themes.

Before any interviews, a selection was made to ensure the participant did not have a previous diagnosis or experienced trauma in their life that would increase the likelihood they would turn to Internet media to cope. Similarly, they must not have struggled with their gender

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identity. The goal was to rule out any extraneous variables that may affect the data and decrease the study's validity.

Having a second researcher, who is not attached to the study, verify the coding system to come to a mutual agreement on its validity helped supplement the credibility of the results. Also, as the study had interviews, this increased the likelihood of the answers being more accurate and increased trustworthiness, based on a constructivist approach to reconstructing participants' interpretations (Jones & Donmoyer, 2020). It is easy for a participant to give random answers on a survey or perhaps an incorrect one due to failing to understand the question's meaning. Due to the small sample and similar geographic location, the data is not generalizable, but the study can be replicated on a larger scale.

### **Trustworthiness**

#### ***Credibility***

Research credibility was established by collecting interview data on what was said and observed. The interviews were voice recorded, and I noted observations, such as body language. To ensure a mutual agreement, a separate researcher not affiliated with this study reviewed the codes. The data was analyzed through the organismic integration theory (Sheldon & Titova, 2023), persuasion theory (Chen et al., 2022), self-determination theory (Benita, 2020), and the theory of motivated free will (Clarke & Shariff, 2021). Following the interviews, the participants were made aware of the data's interpretations and the study's intentions.

#### ***Transferability***

The generalizability of the findings was limited as the sample size was small with little diversity, but results could be used as a baseline in future studies. As the study uses a specific demographic (White young adults in a rural city in Quebec, Canada), the same study could be

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replicated with a different sample diversity to review for differences in race, age, or location. The study could also be replicated to separate genders to determine gender differences in Internet media influence. The participants were contacted by word of mouth, and interviews were held individually in a private office. The interviews were face-to-face, but slightly at an angle so as not to be confrontational, with the recording device subtly placed between the interviewer and the participant.

### *Dependability*

The study was outlined, allowing for it to be replicable and dependable. Future research can use the same interview questions. Although the interviews were semi-structured, this was only to allow for detailed explanations from the participants. Themes will be based on the agreed-upon codes and codex of answers that can remain constant in all duplications of this study. The theories and triangulation used for credibility increased dependability (Janis, 2022).

### *Confirmability*

Confirmability was strengthened as the interviews were audibly recorded and transcribed verbatim (Stenfors et al., 2020). The themes that came from the interviews were based on a coding system that an outside researcher evaluated to come to a mutual understanding. The findings consist of direct quotes from the participants and coding was based on verbatim transcripts. Data was collected through the voice recordings of the interviews and observations I noted (ex., Body language).

### *Reliability*

Interview questions were pre-established with a choice of answers available. The participants had the opportunity to select an answer given or give one of their own. Either way, the answers came directly from the participants, avoiding researcher bias. The sample was biased

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as the population consisted of a majority of White young adults. However, an audit trail demonstrated record keeping and reasoning for the interpretation of data. Findings from this research were gathered from voice recordings of participants' interviews, explaining their understanding and realities, and observations I made during the interviews. The codes were mutually determined by an outside researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

A well-structured qualitative data analysis can assist the research in drawing conclusions and establishing validity (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews and employed a recording device to ensure the clarity of participant responses. This study followed a grounded theory lite approach (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). The aim of this design was based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this exact reason.

To ensure a mutual agreement, a separate researcher not affiliated with this study reviewed the codes (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). The transcripts from the interviews and observations from the interviewer were analyzed. Member check is a data analysis strategy to increase validity (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021; Stenfors et al., 2020). I completed member checks with the participants following their interviews to ensure the correct interpretation of their responses. Stenfors et al. (2020) also mention the importance of reflexivity when conducting interviews. I may have been seen as an expert in this field, which may be taken as an imbalance of power, but the tone of the interviews was informal.

The data was coded to join similar thoughts, keywords, and topics among the participants (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Following the method explained by Memur and Sezgin (2023), deductive coding was used in the analysis, beginning with open coding and segmented line by

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line. Next, axial coding was done to categorize the initial codes. Finally, all categories and subcategories were clearly and specifically defined.

### **Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations**

#### **Delimitations**

The sample was the basis for gathering initial insights into how Internet media impacts social and socio-emotional development. However, due to the homogeneity of the sample, consisting mainly of young White adults from Quebec, Canada who share similar demographics and have little diversity in terms of race, age, and culture, the findings cannot be broadly generalized. Initially, there were ten semi-structured interviews, which were extended to twelve to reach saturation.

Past social issues may contribute to the excessive consumption of Internet media. For instance, experiences like abuse or bullying could potentially influence how often and how long individuals use Internet media, as well as their reasons for doing so. These past social events are the foundation for the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria entail the participant being between the ages of 18 to 32, having no prior diagnoses, and having no prior traumatic events. The exclusion criteria are the absence of a clinical diagnosis of any disorder, having ever struggled with identity, or having experienced life-altering traumatic events.

The study encompassed the Internet media habits of young adults and examined whether and how this influenced their development. The interviews examined their demographics, social behavior, identity reinforcement, self-regulating skills, and decision-making processes. Other forms of development (ex. cognitive, physical) were not explored. The degree of influence was measured by the participants' replies to the specific questions and their decision-making process when faced with a moral and ethical situation.

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### **Assumptions**

There were four assumptions in this study. First, it was assumed that there are varying levels of Internet media consumption within the college student population. Second, I assumed that identity and social behavior represent social development. The third assumption is that self-regulation of emotions is representative of socio-emotional development. The final assumption is that Internet media has the power to influence young adults. All assumptions are necessary to discover information on the research questions and give an understanding of the research.

### **Limitations**

While the study aimed to narrow the data gap concerning the influence of Internet media, it is important to acknowledge a few limitations. Firstly, the study encompassed various forms of media (such as social media, podcasts, and Internet gaming) to offer a comprehensive view of their impact on development. However, future research might gain value from investigating each media type separately rather than combined.

Also, research is limited to young adults as, outside of adolescents, they are the largest users of Internet media, and there are many extraneous variables with younger ages (Guthold et al., 2019). Interviews were held, and although the answers received were likely more reliable than those from a survey, there were far fewer participants. Time restraints and limitations with the sample pool did not permit the study to complete multiple interviews. Another possible limitation may be that participants may have felt led in the questioning and attempted to give answers that would please me instead of giving honest opinions.

Another limitation was the absence of physiological testing or neuroimaging, which could provide insights into biological responses and the neural pathways involved in thought processes before and after Internet media exposure, typically through techniques like fMRI

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imaging (Irie et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). This approach offers precise data that is not reliant on self-reporting. While the interview questions allowed for participant explanations, it is important to note that individuals' perceptions of their reasons for media use and their recollection of their general internet media consumption may not be entirely accurate, potentially influenced by false memories or uncertainty. This reliance on recall could pose a threat to the study's validity.

The fourth limitation pertains to the existence of multiple facets of identity development, which Internet media can influence. Media can exert an indirect influence on virtually everyone (for instance, political voting is affected by media on a broad scale), and it was selected as a source of measurement for social and socio-emotional developmental outcomes. Nevertheless, by using biological and physiological assessments like fMRI scans and heart rate measurements, it would be possible to track the decision-making process and extract precise, objective data (Irie et al., 2022). This data could also be generalized, as subjective factors do not influence it, and it involves mapping blood flow, which activates different regions of the brain (Irie et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

### Summary

What is concerning with media and society is that the influence it has is not always known. A study by Burt (2018) showed that after seeing a group of decisions made by college-aged students, they were shocked to see the extent to which they were influenced by the media they consumed. Not knowing the power of something that is consumed regularly and daily can be dangerous as it affects development. This danger is the main concern for the gap in the literature and why this study aimed to inform on how everyone, whether consuming Internet media or not, is affected by it directly or indirectly.

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The research methodology was explained, as well as how it will complement preexisting research. Previous research shows the lack, and therefore the need, to add qualitative data to quantitative numbers. More so than this is the need, even obligation, to demonstrate how important and influential the media's message is. Adding a voice and emotion with concrete examples to the data helped stress the point of its importance. A comparison will also be available for future research to see if the qualitative data from first-hand interviews reflects the data seen in quantitative data.

Participants for the current study were recruited by word of mouth, and interviewed through a semi-structured interview process, and the results were coded and entered into a table to give a graphic of the data. From this information, the research was expected to demonstrate a good picture of the extent Internet media influences. The interview questions were designed to see how the participants base their decisions on life situations (entertainment, politics, priorities). The results are not generalizable as the sample is relatively small and has a specific sample pool; however, the pool contained prime candidates for media users. The goal was to glimpse the typical average media consumer's decision-making process. This view gave a view into how and why decisions are made and if Internet media impacts them. Chapter 4 will explain the details of the study for replication. The step-by-step process will be outlined, and data will be collected and analyzed.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

**Overview**

There are three sections in Chapter Four relating to the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews. The chapter sections are in the following order: descriptive results, findings, and summary. A qualitative analysis of the study's findings was completed. Throughout the chapter will be an overview of how data was collected, how the inquiry correlates with the research questions, and how they are the source of the study.

The study used the grounded theory lite (Ramanadhan et al., 2021) for a comparison between heavy and moderate Internet media use among young adults. A form of grounded theory lite was used as there was a lack of resources, and the study is an initial qualitative look into Internet media's influence on development. A formal theory is not produced with a lite version of grounded theory (unlike the full grounded theory). Grounded theory lite is to give a basis for an understanding in the domain of research and not to produce a formal theory but to help develop one. Themes were listed in an Excel spreadsheet, and a word cloud was made to group like subjects and give a visual of their frequency. The word cloud highlighted repeated key terms, concepts, or phrases.

This chapter contains the results of the grounded theory lite study conducted to answer the research questions. Also included in the chapter is a discussion of the analysis conducted. Furthermore, it asserts that the examination aligns with the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. Lastly, this chapter presents tables illustrating sample demographics, offering detailed code and theme data, and includes figures portraying participants' answers to their Internet media habits and decision-making.

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The study gained credibility by having an intercoder (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The coding was cross-verified with a researcher who is not attached to the study and a mutual agreement was made on the coding standards. All transcripts were processed through mutually agreed-upon coding. Through the process of in-person, one-on-one interviews, the validity of responses increased to those compared to an anonymous survey (Jain, 2021). All recordings were kept on a password-protected recording device and each participant was given a pseudonym for their interview. The pseudonyms are attached to their consent form which are all kept separately from the voice recordings and are locked in a drawer in my locked office.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory lite study was to explore Internet media's influence on college students at Champlain College, Lennoxville, in Quebec, Canada. The focus of the study was on influence related to social (identity and behavior) and socio-emotional (emotional regulation) development, as seen through college students between 18 to 24 years old. This demographic of 18- to 24-year-olds was chosen as they are heavy users of Internet media (90% in the USA) and because they are still highly influential (Bettmann et al., 2020).

Internet media is accessible through a variety of Internet-connected devices, such as computers, smartphones, and tablets, at any time and from any location (Tana et al., 2020). A study by Morrison et al. (2020) showed the importance of exploring this influence through which they showed that participants concluded their decision on whether psychotherapy was a valid method of treatment, based on what they saw on TV or in movies. When the participants viewed fictional characters who appreciated the treatment and had a positive attitude, they were open to trying psychotherapy as a treatment. The reverse is also true, when the fictional characters shared

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a negative view, participants were reluctant and saw it as ineffective. This tendency to accept what is portrayed in the media as fact shows the importance of this study.

### **Data Collection Process**

#### *Approval and Consent*

IRB approval was granted (approval # IRB-FY23-24-1042) from Liberty University, but Champlain College denied approval for recruiting students. Permission was denied as the college found the exclusive criteria (if there was a previous struggle with identity) not to be inclusive enough for the school as it was excluding transgender students. Following this denial, the participant pool was slightly altered to consist of young adults from 18 to 32 years old. They are not students but are young adults from the same region and meeting the same inclusion/exclusion criteria. An in-person invitation was made to a group of employees with the criterion explained. Those interested were asked to contact me by email and to advise others who match the criterion of the possibility of participating in the study. Interviews were then scheduled, and data was recorded and collected from twelve semi-structured interviews. Before any questions were asked, the participants reviewed the informed consent form upon their arrival at the interview and consented to participate in the study and be recorded. The three research questions were also altered to replace “college students” with “young adults.”

Initially, ten semi-structured interviews were scheduled with young adults who were heavy Internet media consumers, and three additional interviews were conducted to satisfy data saturation. Each participant shared their own experiences with Internet media and their decision-making process. Reflexivity was conducted to compensate for any sense of an unbalanced power equilibrium between myself and the participants during the interviews (Stenfors et al., 2020). The details of how this was established are explained later in this chapter. Before beginning the

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interviews, rapport was developed with the participants by a short conversation to put them at ease and make the interviews informal. The procedure was explained again, and they were advised that there were no wrong answers.

### *Interviewing and Coding*

Based on interviews with demographic, social behavior, socio-emotional, and influence questions, the research response was thematically analyzed. Interviews were audio-recorded on an electronic audio-recording device before being transcribed, and observations were noted. This method was the process of data collection which happened simultaneously with analysis and iteratively. The audio recordings were on a password-protected device and kept in a locked drawer in a locked office along with the consent forms. The participants, who all had access to multiple-choice answers for each question, were given the option to select from the choices given or provide their answers, experiences, or opinions. The majority of answers were from the options given with little expansion of them. Transcription took seven steps of data analysis before the final categorization and narration were completed.

The primary source of information was the twelve interviews that were completed. There were thirteen interviews done, but one was excluded as the participant did not meet the inclusion criteria because they moved to a different city over three times. The unstable home life was a possible extraneous variable and could be an alternative reason for media use. This participant's answers were excluded but had answers that were opposing the ones by the other participants. For instance, this participant was the only one to mention that she kept to herself growing up and did not rely on her parents, showing an avoidant/disordered attachment. She also mentioned not being able to control the emotion of powerlessness and was the only participant to believe that ending a three-month relationship by "ghosting" someone was socially acceptable. In part, this

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participant would have been a possible negative case if her data was eligible. Each interview was 11 to 20 minutes long, including the member checks, a data analysis strategy to increase validity by confirming the interpretation of the participants' answers was exact (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021; Stenfors et al., 2020). In step one, the recordings were transcribed by hand to transcribe the interviews verbatim textually. As part of the iterative process, three rounds of interviews were carried out. There were two groups of five interviews, and three more followed to ensure theoretical saturation. The first group of five participants were interviewed, and only one offered their answers. Participant Two had a hard time with some of the questions as she was on the spot and felt as though there were correct answers to give. Following this insight, the interviews were altered to express that there were no right or wrong answers, and the participants were reminded on different occasions that they may use their answers as well. Extra effort was given to create an informal atmosphere so no further participant would feel “on the spot.”

More time was spent on the introduction, and participants were reassured that the interview was not an evaluation of their knowledge and that their answers were subjective to their reality. Some participants were having difficulties with the meaning of words or questions, so examples were given to the second group of participants. More focus was put on observations for the second group as well. The method of the interview changed to be more adaptable for the participants and the focus of inquiry shifted to observations. General observations were done on the first group (ex. How they were sitting), but more detail was assessed with the second group (tone of voice, level of comfort, and my impression of their comfort level).

The data already began to show certain distinctions as they were divided evenly or slightly unbalanced. The direction was focused on observation and the interview style/method. The responses from the second group of five both extended and solidified the data, which is why

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a third round of three participants was interviewed to reach theoretical saturation. The additional interviews strengthened the equality of division and showed a true clumping of answers.

Additional data did not expand the established codes, and the data from the interviews consistently provided support for the existing codes.

In step two, the texts of the interviews were reviewed and edited to compare with the audio recordings to ensure there were no discrepancies between the two, and then edited to remove filler words and non-relevant sentences from the study. Next was step three, deductive coding of the transcript using open coding. Codes were conceived from the raw data line by line (Tie et al., 2019).

Answers from the interview questions were coded based on previous research. The following are definitions explaining why the interview questions were coded in the manner they were. Having an external need for approval has been seen to show negative social behavior (Oliver et al., 2021). A person's identity is secure when they can differentiate real from virtual and positive self-esteem (Arfini et al., 2021). Personality type in terms of friendship is secluded when there are no close friends but outgoing when there are five or more (van der Wilt, 2023). Not overreacting and using strategies to contain emotions are known to be good regulations (Guclu et al., 2022). When looking for external validation, a person tends to be highly influenceable (Laursen & Faur, 2022). Being concerned about the impact on others shows high social value (Doppelhofer et al., 2021). If a person is willing to hurt others for their gain, they demonstrate a utilitarian view, and a deontological view if they are not (Wang et al., 2021).

Axial coding, step five, involved categorizing participant responses into groups based on similar themes and comments, aligning with the thematic analysis process (Tie et al., 2019). The coded data was then combined in step six to define the categories and the final narrative of the

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findings. An Excel spreadsheet was created in step seven as a form of consolidation of the data to combine similar themes.

From the twelve interviews, relevant responses were indicated on the spreadsheet. For an answer to be relevant, it must meet the following criteria:

- Be related to Internet media use,
- Be a direct answer to the question.

A pie chart was not needed to display the heavy and low users as all participants showed what was operationally defined as heavy use; average use of over three hours per week.

I was observing the participants during the interviews. The main purpose of this was to ensure the participants were at ease and gave their honest opinions. Body language was observed to determine how comfortable a participant was (ex., Sitting straight, leg shaking, hands fidgeting, and all other signs of unease). Considering reflexivity, the interviews were kept informal to help the participants feel on an equal level and avoid the interviewer being seen as an expert and biased.

### ***Research Questions***

Below are the three research questions that guided the study. Researching previous studies on Internet media influence and development led to the design of each research question. This chapter discusses the results of the study that was aimed at answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding social behavior developmental delays?

RQ 2: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding identity developmental delays?

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RQ 3: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from low users regarding self-regulation of emotional developmental delays?

The interview questions were derived from the study's three research questions and the data was reflective of them.

### **Descriptive Results**

#### **Participant Demographic**

The sample consisted of twelve participants who all shared the demographic of being from Quebec, Canada. There was a split of three males and nine females who all have heavy Internet media use. Each participant met the inclusion criteria as discussed in Chapter Three. Inclusion criteria were assessed via recruitment invitations and interview questions. When eligibility criteria were met, participants were enrolled in the study on a rolling basis. The participants were recruited via an in-person discussion that advised of the inclusive criteria.

For Internet media use, twelve (100%) participants were heavy users. Two (17%) participants were 18, three (25%) were 19, four (33%) were 20, two (17%) were 23 years old and one (8%) was 24. There were three males (25%) and nine females (75%). The demographics are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

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<b>Participants</b>	<b>12</b>
Use	
Heavy	12
Moderate	0
Age	
18	2
20	2
24	4
30	2
32	2
Gender	
Male	3
Female	9

**Results**

All participants showed Internet media use. The participants showed different reasoning for and duration of Internet media use. They also showed different levels of influenceability as determined through their decision-making process and related social and socio-emotional development. This influence was examined using the persuasion theory (Chen et al., 2022) and the predetermined codex of replies that were mutually agreed upon with the external researcher.

Of the twelve participants, six (half) showed themselves to be significantly influenced by Internet media for their voting and just under half (six participants) used media to judge what is socially acceptable to others. Many of their decisions were made based on external and media-

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related factors (Chen et al., 2022). Participant Eleven mentioned she would “see what others are doing first but base my decision on my own sense of right and wrong” indicating the first step was still to look externally. Generally, almost half of the participants showed a lack of knowledge of, or desire, to have free will as their decisions were based on external factors with a desire to be accepted by others or fear of rejection, and lack of consciousness decisions through multiple questions (Clarke & Shariff, 2021; Coburn, 2023). For example, six participants do not do research before voting for their Prime Minister and base their votes on what others tell them. Similarly, six participants looked around to see what others were saying or doing to determine what is socially acceptable, and even though there was a split between three options for what they would do in the scenario presented, five of the participants changed their decision when there were witnesses around.

When asked about the main purpose for Internet media use, all but one participant used it for entertainment with a few mentioning they use it equally for entertainment and information seeking, communication, or news. The cognitive evaluation theory (Hsu, 2022) and basic psychological needs theory (Sheldon & Titova, 2023) specify how reasoning for task selection is based on psychological needs, like autonomy, and how much they relate to the task.

The attachment the participants had to their parents proved to be similar to most participants and was reflected in similar answers to the demographic questions of their attachment. Only two participants mentioned not being able to count on their parents (2) and having dismissive parents (2).

Social behavior was the area with the most variance between participants. Participant One said they did not spend more than ten minutes editing a picture before posting, but Participant Three did. Eleven participants did three or more selfless acts and showed positive

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prosocial behavior, an even division with half feeling jealous at times and the other half not, and four participants saying they purposefully planned posts in hopes of making someone jealous. Although eight participants hold a high social value for others and believe “ghosting” is not acceptable after a three-month relationship, two of those revealed that they would run past and steal food for their families. The remaining nine would explain the situation to the storekeeper (6) or keep walking (3).

Identity was evenly divided for the most part when defined through Internet media use. Six participants had similar online and real-life identities and six said somewhat. The majority (8), said to “somewhat” use media to explore their identity while four did not at all. Every participant saw themselves and felt others saw them in a positive light with an average of eight positive descriptive words and only two negative ones. Most participants (8) had between three and five good friends with three having between one and two, and only one having more than five. Participant One said to not engage in social media, but only to refer to it for information “I don’t have an online presence. I don’t post anything”. His answers for posting were coded as positive social behavior and negative media influence on identity as he did not alter his identity at all and did not rely on a social media presence for his behavior. This coding was mutually agreed upon with the intercoder. The social acceptance theory (Olan et al., 2022) demonstrates how developing identity can be highly influenced through media.

Emotional regulation was seen to be evenly divided among the twelve participants. The results showed that half the participants had control over their emotions, showing determination in the face of failure. Seven participants did not practice mindfulness techniques, and five of those had negative self-talk. The majority of participants (8) had one emotion that they could not control, which was either Anger (5) or Sadness (5). Only two participants indicated feeling

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complete control over their emotions and had none that they believed they could not control. On the other side, participant Two had four emotions she could not control even though she “sometimes” practices mindfulness. The differential susceptibility to media effect model (Tuck et al., 2023), self-determination theory (Benita, 2020), and feelings as information theory (Zhou et al., 2023) state how emotions can affect the interpretation of media and therefore influence development.

Although nine of the twelve participants were able to name three celebrities and two could name two celebrities, only half were able to name three academics. These results indicate a potential lack of academic knowledge and focus on media. The influence of Internet media was also seen in voting habits with only eight of the participants doing research before a vote and six who vote based on the opinions of others. Participant Nine said to combine both “My own research, but also from what I have seen online in Newspapers, TikTok, media, a lot gets posted through there.” However, deciding what is socially acceptable and in style did not show to relate to Internet media as nine participants said that they reflected on their sense of right and wrong instead of looking to others for what should be done. Participant 11 said, “I like to see what others do, but I also like to use my judgment.” Only three participants mentioned basing style on social media and one of the three, Participant Nine, said:

“I think there’s a mix for that for me – new styles emerge from social media and that’s where I get a lot of my ideas, but I am also the type of person that if I am comfortable in it, I’m gonna wear it.”

Participant Six mentioned basing her style on social media, friends, and what she wants.

The decision-making process was evaluated, in part, through their responses to the ethical and scenario questions. For instance, when asked if ending a three-month relationship by

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“ghosting” the other person is socially acceptable? Only four participants said a text would suffice, showing the moderately low social value of others and therefore their ability for free will – and not submitting to the social standard set by others (Coburn, 2023; Doppelhofer et al., 2021). Similarly, their reaction to the scenario gives insight into this as well. Eight participants showed a deontological view, by either walking away or explaining their situation to the storekeeper. Of those eight, Participants Seven and Eight changed their decision from explaining to simply walking away if there were witnesses around. The two participants who said to run by and grab as much as they could, all changed their answers to walking away if there were witnesses. Their decision speaks to their freedom of choice as presented in the theory of motivated free will (Clarke & Shariff, 2021), and then how it was affected by witnesses.

### **Study Findings**

#### **Data Analysis Process**

##### ***Overview of Process***

Through a constructivist grounded theory lite methodology, the study answered the three research questions with the collected data (Tie et al., 2019). The thematic data analysis process included (a) transcribing what was said and recorded in the interviews for review to ensure accuracy, (b) reviewing participants’ answers for how they describe their social behavior, identity, and self-regulation of emotions (c) working with an intercoder (outside researcher) to confirm the codes used were indeed valid and come to a consensus on the codes used, (d) organizing the data into themes, keywords, and phrases, (e) reviewing how these themes demonstrate an influence from Internet media, and (f) compiling the participants answers into a textual explanation.

A word cloud was generated for terms from the participants as seen in Figure 1. Figure 1



General themes were coded and are listed as well, and their reoccurrence is noted in Tables 1-10.

### *Data Collection*

Following the constructivist grounded theory lite methodology, the data was collected from these interviews and compiled (Tie et al., 2019). A codebook was used, and deductive and structural coding was done. The a priori codes revealed information about the participants, including their media habits, level of influence versus their free will, and development. The codes in the codebook were predetermined as participants were given choices to select from, including value coding for their ethical beliefs and social behavior/acceptance. Although allowed to provide their answer or belief, all participants used provided answers; except for Participant One, who does not post media and does not have an online personality.

Participants' answers and their explanations were indicated and charted in a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet helped in the analysis of common themes and shared ideas. The answers were

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also coded to group similar concepts, keywords, and thoughts (heavy or low users, purpose for media use, self-regulation, identity, media habits, and demographics). The inclusion criteria were established before transcribing the recorded interviews (aged 18 to 32, never had any prior diagnoses, never experienced prior traumatic events, and never struggled with identity), and reviewed for accuracy. Only comments and explanations relevant to the question were retained (filler words like umm, uh, and ah were excluded, and repeated words).

Before the interviews started, rapport was established to put the participants at ease. I also looked at body language and any other cues that may have been displayed for additional information. The body language of each participant was noted to recognize any abnormalities and level of comfort. These observations are noted in Table 2.

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Table 2

*Observations*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Observations</b>
1	Played with a fidget spinner the whole interview and shifted in his seat. Aside from this, he appeared comfortable with all his answers.
2	<p>Appeared slightly stressed as she wanted to get the right answer for each question.</p> <p>The participant was sitting on the edge of her seat for the whole interview.</p>
3	The participant appeared to be at ease – and was very relaxed in the seat.
4	I had to explain multiple terms to them showing their desire to give accurate answers. The participant seemed on edge at the beginning, but more relaxed with time.
5	The participant was at ease, calm, and relaxed in his sitting. I had to explain many terms, showing their desire to give accurate answers.
6	The participant seemed confident and calm. They were not worried or reluctant to any question and were fully engaged.
7	The participant appeared calm. They mentioned not being able to think of celebrities on the spot, but even with time, would not be able to name 3 Nobel prize winners, scientists, or explorers. This showed their transparency.
8	The participant seemed nervous and was sitting on the edge of the seat. Took time before answering to reflect on her answers.
9	The participant looked nervous but at ease. She gave her full attention.

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10	The participant seemed on guard – as though the interview had trick questions or for an evaluation. She was sitting on the edge of her seat the entire interview.
11	The participant gave her full attention and appeared at ease.
12	The participant seemed relaxed. She also seemed confident in her answers. She gave her full attention to the interview.

***Data Accuracy***

Credibility was established through triangulation by identifying themes from the participant's responses to semi-structured interview questions and observations made throughout the interview process. Identified themes were reviewed for subject consistency with each participant's complete interview. This review increased the validity of the findings by giving a detailed description of the data (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Farquhar et al., 2020; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Before analysis, the codes were co-verified by an intercoder who was not otherwise involved in or had prior knowledge of the study. The discrepancies were addressed and corrected (details of the discrepancies are listed below). Once the corrections were made and after a second revision, the two comprehensions had a mutual understanding. The codes selected reflected a view into participants' experiences, media habits, and influence as compared with free will.

Personal beliefs were noted as well for reflexivity. Before data collection, my bias about young adult Internet media use, degree of influence, and source of identity formation were addressed. I felt that young adults would use media solely for entertainment, depend heavily on media for style, voting habits, and determining what is socially acceptable, and use media as a main source for exploring their identity. These biases were appeased by reading directly off the questionnaire and maintaining a monotone volume while giving little to no reaction after each

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answer to instill a neutral standpoint. Focused coding was used, and therefore already set in place, to determine the participants' level of influence matched with their Internet media habits. This method was used to ensure that personal beliefs do not interfere with the data or affect the research.

The transferability of the results and data was established to be a gateway for future research. The sample does not permit generalization, although it is a starting point and a point of reference for larger demographics (ethnicities, genders, ages, and other demographics). Future studies can use the results from this study as a baseline. Additionally, transferability was ensured by providing a comprehensive and detailed description of the research purpose, methodology, data collection, and analysis process (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants could provide detailed and relevant information to generate themes and give insight into the potential influence of Internet media (Tie et al., 2019).

Dependability was established by examining and summarizing the data and coded themes (Janis, 2022). Showing the range and frequency of reoccurring themes, keywords, and overall responses gave concrete examples of Internet media use. Audit trails were used to break down the narratives presented by the codes and themes in the results section (Tie et al., 2019). The codes were predetermined based on previous research that demonstrated how the results from each question are categorized to give an understanding of how media habits affect development. Codes on behaviors were merged to give a rounded view of the topic. The same was also true for identity, self-regulation, and influence. These codes were merged to make categories based on the research questions. The themes from the categories are the views of the participant and their media habits. These themes give a view into the influence on development. Member checks were also completed with each participant following their interview to ensure correct comprehension

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of their replies (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021; Stenfors et al., 2020). Data selection for the study included audio recordings and observations of the interviews, and allowance of twelve participants who met the inclusion criteria. Documenting the audio recordings by transcribing the interviews and grouping liked themes, terms, keywords, and phrases on an Excel spreadsheet increased the study's dependability (Janis, 2022). A mutual understanding with a non-participating researcher for the coding of the answers also increased the dependability of the study. Thirteen interviews were done as saturation of data was achieved (even with the exclusion of one of the participants). Once coded, the results either showed an equal division (where an equal number of participants agreed and disagreed with the question) or a majority consensus favoring one response (often twice the number of those in the minority). The data was transcribed verbatim and analyzed for similarities as well as links between influence and social (identity and behavior) and socio-emotional (self-regulation of emotions) development.

The mutually agreed-upon coding used in the study is the following:

Intercoder:

For each participant, I compared each answer from the stats tab in the Excel spreadsheet to the code keyword document. Once I had all of the answers written down for each participant, I compared them to what you had documented on the classification tab in the Excel spreadsheet (which I labeled as participant summary) and looked for any differences.

Participant #1 - this is just a suggestion, but since they stated that they do not post for questions 8 and 9, I don't think you should code it as internally dependent. Is there possibly an additional category for "Did not answer" or something along those lines?

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Same thing for question 12 - they do not post, and it seems like there is no theme for that answer, so it was just left out.

For questions 10 and 11, they indicated negative social behavior for 10 and positive social behavior for 11, but it looks like you only listed positive social behavior on the participant summary.

Participant #2 - for question 16, they indicated 3-5 friends, which should be average and coded as neither secluded nor outgoing but was coded as outgoing. For question 17, they answered 2, which should be coded as moderate media knowledge but was listed as high in media knowledge on the participant summary.

Participant #7 - for question 2, they answered both entertainment and communication which should be coded distraction/escape and socializing but was only listed as distraction in the participant summary.

Participant #8 - for questions 8 and 9, they were externally dependent for social acceptance and internally dependent for likes, but only externally dependent was listed in the participant summary, and it appears likes were not included.

Participant #9 - for question 10, they answered both entertainment and information, which should be coded as both distraction and purpose-oriented but is only listed as distraction in the participant summary.

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Participant #11 - for question 20, they responded with both doing and own decision, which is both high and low media influence, but was only listed as high in influence in the participant summary.

Participant #12 - for question 1 under the ethical section, they answered with C, which is no, at least send a text and should be coded as moderately low social value of others but it was listed as high social value of others in the participant summary.

Researcher:

Concerning your suggestions:

Participant 1: I coded questions 8, 9, and 12 for Participant 1 as internally dependent because I did not feel a new theme was needed for this one participant. Your suggestion did make me review their coding however and I adjusted them to "False". My reasoning behind this is that since he does not post anything based on his personal beliefs, his answer is still based on his internal thought process. For the same reason, Question 12 was changed to True. He did not have reason to create a separate identity. Questions 10 and 11 you were correct. I added the missing information and corrected the participant summary.

For Participant 2, I verified the interview questionnaire, and you were correct. They only gave 2 answers, and it should have been coded as moderate media knowledge. I made the necessary corrections to the participant summary.

This mistake was an oversight for Participant 7. Socializing was added to the summary.

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After verifying, you were correct in seeing that they were internally dependent for “Likes.” This error was corrected and the summary was adjusted as well.

I do not see the issue with Participant 9. The answer you mentioned is for Question 2, and it was entered correctly. I also verified Question 10 and it is also correctly entered. Can you please explain what I may have missed.

The correction was made for Participant 11 and low media influence was added to the summary.

The summary was changed for Participant 12 to moderately low social value.

Thank you so much for your evaluation. I have included the corrected version if you can provide one last review and assure me that you agree with all the codes used and would code the participant answers in the same manner. Again, your help is much appreciated!

Intercoder:

After reviewing the amended version, I agree with your analysis and would indeed code the participant answers in the same manner.

It's been a pleasure being able to participate in your research. I wish you the best throughout the remainder of this journey!

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### **Findings**

#### *Analytical Process*

My analysis began by reviewing the transcripts and notes of the first five interviews. Next was the open coding process using the participant's exact words where possible. These steps were repeated for the next five interviews and again with the last three interviews. The data was analyzed throughout the process and interviews were adapted (informal interviews and honest answers) to meet the requirements of the study. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. I pooled together similar themes and subjects based on the research questions. Grouping these similarities, like using social media to explore identity, helped in illustrating how common beliefs are shared over comparable situations. The fact that nine participants felt Internet media was not an influence on style, and voting decisions were split evenly between those who use research and those depending on media and others, demonstrates the relevance of Internet media influence in different areas. When asked about emotions they could not control, participants shared "Anger" and "Sadness," showing a shared perspective even when not prompted with suggested answers. Interviews were kept informal and had to be adjusted to ensure a comfortable interview due to a participant feeling "On the spot" and a general sense of evaluation. Following the adaptation from the first five interviews, the participants did not show signs of unease (for example, trembling, stuttering, or shifting in their seats). This observation led to the belief that there was no perceived imbalance of power.

Ten interviews were completed and analyzed. It was determined that the data was not complete. Three more interviews were completed, and it was seen that one participant's answer was not consistent with the other interviews. It was noticed that they did not meet the inclusion

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criteria as they moved to a different city over three times. The other two interviews added support to the patterns shown. Research on informational power in qualitative interviews indicates that when participants are selected carefully, the study aligns with existing theory, and the dialogue quality is high, smaller sample sizes can be appropriate for ensuring adequate power (Malterud et al., 2016). In addition, a narrow aim and participants closely related to the aim of the study will reduce the number of participants.

For documentation, all twelve interviews from the participants were recorded directly on the Excel spreadsheet with the interview questions, and categories were created from the coding and entered. The spreadsheet allowed for the grouping of similar responses and themes. The participants were given pseudonyms, and their comments were recorded and listed here to show shared beliefs.

The reliability of qualitative data was established through the methods of data collection, the characteristics of the sample, data saturation, and the study's setting (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The research data collection of the design of semi-structured interviews, audio recordings of the interviews, observations made during the interviews, and methods of transcribing the interviews to an Excel spreadsheet from a preestablished codex to join liked themes were described to facilitate the replication of the study by future researchers (Janis, 2022). The standardizing of the interview question and the codex contributed to its potential applicability and replication in other studies (Janis, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow freedom for participants to expand on their answers. These steps were mentioned in the audit trail described above.

The questions from the interview were derived from previous research specifically related to the area of concern (duration, reason for use, and so on). Predetermined answer options

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were given to the participants during the interviews to categorize each participant by media use, purpose of use, self-regulation, identity, media habits, and self-demographics. The interview questions were initially predetermined as they reflect previous research.

Answers were similar to identical, limiting the constant comparative method. As coding was being done and more interviews were completed, participants' answers remained in the same coded themes. As the responses were similar and the questions aimed at answering specific areas of development, no changes were needed. The participants were also encouraged to give their answers or expand on the options given. No one expanded their thoughts, and only one participant gave his answers. I pointed out that they could give their answers, and no one chose this.

The research questions were determined before the interviews as a starting point and an encompassing view of influence on development. There was no need to change the research questions as the data was responding to them. Answers given by the participants were aligned with the research questions and were given a good interpretation of the data. Following the interviews, coding was done in line with the pre-established rubric for answers, giving an understanding of where the data was going and establishing themes. This rubric is why the questions in the interview did not change.

### *Codes*

The study's findings gave multiple codes as the foundation for the themes. The responses were coded by media use (time spent on media, purpose, and posting), then by demographics (parental attachment and relocation), followed by identity (online vs. real-life self, identity formation, how one is viewed by self and by others, and relationships), followed by influence (pop culture knowledge vs. academia knowledge, voting, social behavior, and awareness) and

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lastly was emotional regulation (emotional reaction, mindfulness, self-talk, and uncontrollable emotions). For media use, it is coded as low when under three hours per day and high if over three hours per day and measured by self-assessment/recollection. For the influences, the answers were based on media and academic personality knowledge, voting habits, social acceptability, and style.

Prior to this, the data coded from behavior (selfless acts, editing posts, dependency on “Likes,” and jealousy) were merged to give a rounded view of the topic. The same was true for identity (virtual versus real self, exploration, view of self in own eyes, view of self through others’ eyes, and close friends), self-regulation (reaction to conflict, mindfulness, self-talk, and emotional control), and influence (knowledge of celebrities, knowledge of academics, voting habits, social acceptability, and style). Attachment (media use in time, purpose, relationship with parents, and how often they moved) was later coded as demographics. These were later coded as attachment, social behavior, identity, influence, self-regulation of emotions, development, and ethical decision-making as further interviews showed a link. The final codes of media use, demographics, identity, influence, and emotional regulation were determined as they responded to the three research questions as well as combined the data from the interviews.

The coding process was completed for each participant individually. Once the data was compiled in the spreadsheet, it was evaluated for shared answers and connections. All codes were created, and the evaluation of the data was completed. The codes were cross-verified with an intercoder, and an external researcher, for a mutual agreement. There is a corresponding code for each response from the interviews to describe how these answers describe the participant. Appendix D shows all the codes for each interview question. These codes were merged to make categories based on the research questions.

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*Themes*

Six themes emerged from the data: (a) demographics, (b) free will, (c) self-image, (d) media influence, (e) emotional regulation, and (f) decision-making process. Table 3 displays the six main themes of influence and development.

Table 3

*Influence and Development Themes*

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Themes	Description	Number of references
Demographics	Secure attachment	23
	Heavy media use	12
	Entertainment as a reason for use	11
Behavior	Positive prosocial behavior	25
	Negative prosocial behavior	11
	Positive social behavior	14
	Negative social behavior	10
Self-image	Real identity is partially like virtual	6
	Real-life identity separate from virtual	6
	Somewhat exploration through media	8
	No exploration through media	4
	Positive self-image	24
	Over 3 close friends	9
	Under 3 close friends	3
Free will	Low dependence on media or others	41
	High dependence on media or others	25
Emotional regulation	Control	15
	Uncontrol	18
	Balanced	18

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Decision-making process	Utilitarian	2
	Deontological	10

The first four themes to emerge were media to escape, identity is fragile, cannot regulate emotions, and media influence is strong.

### Demographics

The theme of demographics showed the number of hours spent on Internet media per week, on average, the reason for its use, attachment to their parent and/or caregiver, and number of times they relocated to another city. Following the questions from the interviews, all twelve participants indicated that, to the best of their recollection, having used Internet media for a minimum average of three hours per day. When asked about the main purpose for Internet media use, participants predominantly used it for entertainment with a few mentioning they use it equally for entertainment and information seeking or News. Only Participant One did not use Internet media for entertainment. His sole use for it was information seeking.

The participants generally have secure and sometimes mixed forms for their attachments with their parents based on the parent(s) being involved, present, and supportive (Schulze et al., 2022). For example, six participants have secure attachment in all aspects, but Participants Three, Four, Five, and Seven have a mix of secure and anxious/ambivalent attachment. Surprisingly, Participants Nine and Ten were the only two who showed no secure attachment at all but were both similarly seen to have avoidant/dismissive/, anxious/ambivalent, and dismissive attachments. All twelve participants who were included in the study moved less than three times. All but one of the participants noted having a stable life where they were not forced to change cities and make new friends, change schools, etc. This instability increased the additional

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possibility of turning to Internet media for an escape or communication based on having to relocate (Johnson & Rogers, 2023). The one participant who moved to more than three different cities was excluded from the data as it was an extraneous variable to her Internet media use.

Table 4 gives more details on the demographics of the participants.

Table 4

*Attachment*

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Participants	Media use	Purpose	Relationship	Present	Support
1	5+ hours	Information	Always	Always	Autonomous
2	3-5 hours	Entertainment	Somewhat	Always	Restrictive
3	5+ hours	Entertainment	Always	Always	Autonomous
4	3-5 hours	Entertainment & Information	Somewhat	Always	Restrictive
5	3-5 hours	Entertainment	Always	Somewhat	Restrictive
6	5+ hours	Entertainment & Communication	Always	Always	Autonomous
7	5+ hours	Entertainment & Communication	Always	Always	Restrictive
8	3-5 hours	Entertainment & News	Always	Always	Autonomous
9	3-5 hours	Entertainment & News	Never	Somewhat	Dismissive
10	3-5 hours	Entertainment & Information	Never	Somewhat	Dismissive
11	3-5 hours	Entertainment & Information	Always	Always	Autonomous
12	3-5 hours	Entertainment	Always	Always	Autonomous

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### **Behavior**

Prosocial behavior was seen as positive when participants expressed having done at least three selfless acts (Xiong et al., 2023). In the current research, there were only two participants who did only one to two selfless acts for the year. Participants Four and Nine said to do only one or two acts of kindness.

There was an even split between the participants separating themselves from a digital and real-life identity (seeking internal and external factors for identity) (Ergun, 2020). There were twice as many (8) who “somewhat” explore their identity online and four who do not use Internet media at all for their identity formation. All participants saw themselves in a positive light and believed others saw them positively as well. Only four participants spent ten minutes or more to edit a post before sharing, eight did not have this editing process, and Participant One mentioned “I never post anything.”

Very few participants (2) felt dependent on “Likes” to secure their identity or happiness/well-being (Ergun, 2020). Participant One said “I do not post...I do not care about other people’s opinions.” Seeing others have a seemingly good time from social media posts had an even split with six participants saying “True,” their social behavior proved to be positive since they enjoyed the happiness of others (Xiong et al., 2023), and six saying “False.” Closely related, eight participants said to “Never” make posts in an attempt to make others jealous, while four said “Sometimes” (Imada, 2021). Table 5 shows the results of the participants' social habits.

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Table 5

*Social*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Moved</b>	<b>Selfless acts</b>	<b>Editing</b>	<b>“Likes”</b>	<b>Other’s posts</b>	<b>Personal posts</b>
1	1to2	4+	Does not Post	Does not Post	True	Never
2	0	4+	False	False	True	Sometimes
3	0	3or4	True	True	True	Sometimes
4	1to2	1or2	False	False	False	Never
5	0	3or4	False	False	True	Sometimes
6	1to2	4+	True	False	False	Never
7	1to2	4+	False	False	True	Never
8	1to2	4+	True	False	True	Sometimes
9	1to2	1to2	True	False	False	Never
10	1to2	4+	False	False	False	Never
11	1to2	4+	False	False	False	Never
12	1to2	3or4	False	True	False	Never

In terms of ethics and what the participants find to be socially acceptable, the majority (8) of participants had a high social value of others, as they believe ending a three-month

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relationship should be done face-to-face (Xu, et al., 2022). The remaining participants believed that a “Text” was sufficient except for Participant Eleven who felt that:

“For me, you have to talk to the person, but there are different ways somehow to reach a person, so it could be like a phone call or face-to-face. I would be more flexible on the way to do it, but for me, ghosting is not sufficient.”

In Table 6, the ethical view of the participants is displayed.

Table 6

### *Ethical*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Is “Ghosting” Socially Acceptable</b>
1	No, should be done face-to-face
2	No, should be done face-to-face
3	No, should be done face-to-face
4	No, send a text
5	No, send a text
6	No, send a text
7	No, should be done face-to-face
8	No, should be done face-to-face
9	No, should be done face-to-face
10	No, should be done face-to-face
11	No, should be done face-to-face or by phone
12	No, send a text

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### Self-Image

Participants shared an even division with their identity as seen with this theme. Six participants felt they shared a similar online personality to their real-life personality, thereby showing a secure personality, while six participants identified as having “Somewhat” similarities between the two lives and a fluctuating identity (Arfini et al., 2021). Participant One said “I don’t have an online personality. I don’t really talk to people online.” In terms of using social media to explore their identity (Huang et al., 2021), eight of the participants said to had done this “Somewhat” and the remaining four had not done this at all.

Based on the interviews, all the participants feel they are seen in a positive light by others as well as how they see themselves. Participant Five said to sees himself as “Honest, Diplomatic, Helpful, Loyal, Likable, Sincere, Considerate, and Fun to be around”. Participant Eight said to be “Fun, Socially awkward, Approachable, Kind, Friendly, Empathetic, Genuine, Funny, Easy-going, Intelligent, and Optimistic” by others. Participant Four had the most negative perceived views from others, with five adjectives “Hard to please, Impatient, Touchy, Lazy, Artificial”. This is based on a higher average of positive self-affirming adjectives. Participants Three and Eight had the greatest differential in positive opinion from others with ten positive adjectives and only one negative for Participant Eight, and seven positive adjectives and zero negative for Participant Three. The average for the group was 8.13 positive and 2.58 negative adjectives in other’s opinions and 9.46 positive and 2 negative for personal opinions of themselves.

The participants had a combination of “Secluded” and “Neither secluded nor outgoing” identities as there were three participants with one to two close friends and eight participants who mentioned having between three and five close friends (Thomas et

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al., 2021). Only Participant Eleven said to have five or more close friends. Table 7 portrays factors in the identity of the participants.

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Table 7

*Identity*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Real and Virtual Self are the Same</b>	<b>Uses Media to Explore Identity</b>	<b>How Other's View Them (Number of adjectives)</b>	<b>How they View Themselves (Number of adjectives)</b>	<b>Number of Close Friends</b>
1	No online personality	False	9+, 2-	6+, 2-	1 to 2
2	True	Somewhat	9+, 3-	10+, 4-	3 to 5
3	Somewhat	Somewhat	7+	10+, 2-	1 to 2
4	Somewhat	Somewhat	7+, 5-	10+, 2-	1 to 2
5	True	Somewhat	8+, 3-	8+, 5-	3 to 5
6	Somewhat	Somewhat	8.5+, 3-	9.5+, 3-	3 to 5
7	Somewhat	Somewhat	9+, 2-	8+, 1-	3 to 5
8	Somewhat	Somewhat	10+, 1-	8+	3 to 5
9	True	Somewhat	9+, 2-	10+	3 to 5
10	Somewhat	False	8+, 2-	10+, 2-	3 to 5
11	True	False	8+, 3-	10+	5+
12	True	False	5+, 3-	6+, 3-	3 to 5

**Free Will**

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Free will is the theme revolving around the influence of Internet media on the participants. The participants were able to list three celebrities with ease with only Participants Two and Seven who could name only two and Participant Ten who could not name any. Six participants could name three academics, five could not name any at all, and Participant Twelve could name only one. This contrast between knowledge types shows the high level of media personality knowledge versus the mixed level of high and low academic knowledge (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021).

The gathering of information for their Prime Ministerial vote was shown to come from a mix of media and research (Frimpong et al., 2020). Only Participant Nine said to do research, but also review media “I would say my own research, but also from things I have seen online”. Whether already known from previous media news or headlines and news bytes, Internet media had an influence.

In deciding what is socially acceptable or in style, the participant's results showed a low amount of Internet media influence on social behavior as eight participants have their sense of right and wrong, and five participants depend on what others are saying or doing. Participant One mentioned “I will think critically and assert my own opinion about what is right or wrong. I am not going to let people convince me otherwise.” This statement was categorized as “Own sense of right and wrong” as there is a personal thought process, and he states clearly that he will not be influenced by others. Participant Eleven said, “I like to look around and see what others do, but I also like to use my own judgment, so I don’t know...it’s like in between”. Eleven participants have their own style while three depend on social media, Participant Nine said “I think there’s a mix in that for me. When a new style emerges in social media, that’s where I get a lot of my ideas, but I’m also very much the type of person where if I’m comfortable in it I will

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just wear it.” Self-acceptance is partially determined through social acceptance in that people tend to agree for the sole purpose of fitting in and being accepted by the group (Ruan et al., 2023). Table 8 gives the results of participant influence.

Table 8

*Influence*

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<b>Participants</b>	<b>Media Personalities</b>	<b>Academics Personalities</b>	<b>Vote</b>	<b>Socially Acceptable</b>	<b>Style</b>
1	3	3	Research	Own	Style or not
2	2	0	Family	What others are doing	Style or not
3	3	0	Family	What others are saying	Social media
4	3	0	Headlines	What others are doing	Style or not
5	3	3	Family	Own	Style or not
6	3	3	Research & Headlines	What others are saying	Style or not / Friends/ Social media
7	2	0	Research	Own	Style or not
8	3	3	Research	What others are saying	Style or not
9	3	3	Research & Headlines	Own	Style or not / Social media
10	0	0	Research	Own	Style or not
11	3	3	Research	What others are doing / Own	Style or not
12	3	1	Research	Own	Style or not

**Emotional Regulation**

The emotional regulation theme demonstrates how the participants manage their emotions. Control of emotions was shown to differ. When faced with a dilemma, Participants One, Four, Eleven, and Twelve were “Determined” to find another solution; two participants would get “Angry,” and four participants would get “Sad.” However, Participant Two would get “Angry” and “Sad,” and Participant Nine would get “Sad and Determined.” A lack of strategies for emotional regulation (Lopez-Ramon et al., 2023) was seen in the results in the majority of participants (7) who would “Never” practice mindfulness, four participants would “Sometimes” practice, and only Participant One would “Always” practice mindfulness by “I go to the gym, all the time. I also go for a walk in the woods, make a fire, be alone, be with nature.” There was an even split with self-talk among the participants as six of them had positive, six said to have negative, and Participant Nine said to have “Both sometimes. It can be a mix of both I would say.” Self-talk can have a direct effect on the regulation of emotions (Basset et al., 2021). The participants showed a mix of control and regulation with their emotions. Eight participants had one emotion they could not control, which included three who said “Anger,” three for “Sadness,” and two for “Anxiety.” One participant had two emotions “Sadness and Anger,” another participant had four emotions “Anger, Sadness, Anxiety/Stress, and Impatience,” and Participants Eleven and Twelve had all emotions under control. Higher executive functioning is said to show more control over emotion regulation and experience fewer negative emotions (Reed et al., 2020). A summary of the results is listed in Table 9.

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Table 9

*Emotional Regulation*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Reaction to Adversity</b>	<b>Mindfulness</b>	<b>Self-talk</b>	<b>Emotions</b>
1	Determined	Always	Positive	Anger
2	Angry & Sad	Sometimes	Negative	Anger, Sadness, Anxiety/Stress, Impatience
3	Sad	Never	Negative	Anger
4	Determined	Never	Positive	Sadness
5	Angry	Sometimes	Positive	Anger
6	Sad	Sometimes	Positive	Anxiety
7	Sad	Never	Negative	Anxiety
8	Sad	Sometimes	Positive	Sadness
9	Sad & Determined	Never	Positive & Negative	Sadness
10	Angry	Never	Negative	Anger & Sadness
11	Determined	Never	Positive	Under control
12	Determined	Never	Negative	Under control

**Decision-making Process**

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Participants making decisions based on an ethical scenario gave insight into this theme. The results of the scenario gave interesting standpoints as it is evenly divided into utilitarian and deontological views (Wang et al., 2021). The difference is in the degrees of these views – with signs of ruthlessness and naval-gazing or forthcoming and openness (Wang et al., 2021). Participants One and Two showed a “Utilitarian-only view,” while Participants Three, Five, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten all showed “Deontological and forthcoming, and open behavior.” A “Deontological-only view” was seen by Participants Four, Six, Eleven, and Twelve. None of the participants showed signs of “Ruthlessness or naval gazing”, which would have been if they pushed the storekeeper. Another interesting factor is the change in having witnesses to their actions. Participants One, Two, and Four, who were the only three to “Run past and grab what they could”, changed their choice to “Keep on walking” when witnesses were nearby, even though their paths were not blocked. Participants Seven and Eight changed their decision from “Explaining their situation” to “Keep on walking” when there were witnesses to their actions. Table 10 shows how the participants' behavior changes when there are witnesses.

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Table 10

*Scenario*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Food baskets/no witnesses</b>	<b>Food baskets/with witnesses</b>
1	Run and grab	Keep on walking
2	Run and grab	Keep on walking
3	Explanation	Explanation
4	Keep on walking	Keep on walking
5	Explanation	Explanation
6	Keep on walking	Keep on walking
7	Explanation	Keep on walking
8	Explanation	Keep on walking
9	Explanation	Explanation
10	Explanation	Explanation
11	Keep on walking	Keep on walking
12	Keep on walking	Keep on walking

These themes revolve around the research questions by showing how the development of social behavior, identity, and emotional regulation of college students with heavy Internet media use. The themes showed how behavior and determining what was socially acceptable was influenced, as seen in voting habits, ethical dilemmas, and style. Self-regulation of emotions was seen with participants unable to manage (anger, sadness, anxiety, and impatience).

**Summary**

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Chapter four describes the results of the twelve semi-structured interviews of young adults in Quebec, Canada, and their Internet media use and influence. The participants provided reasoning for their personal use and frequency. They also gave insight into their decision-making process which was analyzed for links between influence and the media. The goal of the study was to determine the level, if any, of influence on social and socio-emotional development. All six themes combined to answer the research questions.

There were five primary results from the study that were centered around the three research questions. The first was that all participants were heavy users, and a comparison could not be made between heavy and moderate users, but a set of findings was established for heavy users. The second primary finding was that among heavy Internet media users, social behavior development was virtually evenly divided into positive and negative prosocial and social behavior apart from being dependent on “Likes” on a posting to determine well-being. Third, predominately secure identities and positive self-images were seen. Fourth, the participants were divided between control and bad regulation of emotions. Finally, free will was seen to also be divided between high and low influence from Internet media.

The primary findings look at Internet media’s impact on development. In most areas, the participants were evenly divided. These results will be more defined and discussed in Chapter Five. The limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research will also be reviewed.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

**Overview**

The purpose of the qualitative grounded theory lite study was to explore Internet media's influence on the development of young adults in Quebec, Canada. Although much research on media influence has been done, very few have taken a qualitative stance. The purpose of the current study was to bring qualitative data to the quantitative numbers. Influence was measured by the impact it had on development as seen through qualitative data collected from semi-structured individual interviews and direct expressions from young adults regarding their Internet media use as well as their decision-making process. Development is looked at through social (behavior and identity) and socio-emotional (emotional regulation). The goal of the study was to identify whether Internet media influences young adults in their development, and the findings shed light on the extent to which it does. The interviews show that most participants were confident in their answers. The results were sometimes evenly divided, and other times, the vast majority selected one particular answer, and seeing the participants' reaction when giving their response showed their strength in the belief of their answer.

Chapter Five will give a greater discussion and a detailed summary of the study's findings and how they affect the field of research. The implications that the findings will have and how they will benefit research, awareness, treatment, and the impact they have on a biblical aspect are given. The limitations of this study will be listed and explained, as well as recommendations for future research. Three research questions guided the research study:

RQ1: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from those of low users regarding social behavior developmental delays?

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RQ 2: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from those of low users regarding identity developmental delays?

RQ 3: How do the experiences of young adults with heavy internet media use differ from those of low users regarding self-regulation of emotional developmental delays?

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **RQ1 Social behavior**

The findings showed a division where half of heavy Internet media users were high in prosocial behavior and the other half low in prosocial behavior. Twice as many participants were seen to be internally dependent on social acceptance from the data. The majority of participants were internally dependent for their happiness, and an even split was seen between negative and positive tendencies for social behaviors.

#### **RQ2 Identity**

The heavy-use participants' identities varied from a secure identity to a fluctuating identity, as six of the twelve had no overlap between their real-life and online identities, while the other six had somewhat of an overlap in their identities. Social media was somewhat used as a tool for the exploration of identity by eight users who had a trial identity, and four users showed a secure identity without needing it to explore other options of who they are. All heavy users had a positive self-image based on how they saw themselves and how others saw them. Similarly, the majority (eight participants) showed themselves to be neither secluded nor outgoing as operationally defined. Three were secluded, and only Participant Eleven was outgoing.

#### **RQ3 Emotional regulation**

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There was a central division between high, low, and no control of emotions among all participants. Seven participants showed to never practice mindfulness techniques for self-regulating strategies, four only sometimes, and only Participant One said to “Always” practice them. Practicing these techniques did not appear to affect self-talk as there was an even division between those who had a positive and negative one. Participant Nine said to have both positive and negative. Of the seven participants to “Never” practice techniques, only four said to have negative self-talk as well. The majority of participants (eight) showed average regulation over their emotions, with only one participant unable to control two emotions, and one unable to control four emotions. Participants Eleven and Twelve showed good regulation by not having any uncontrollable emotions.

### **Attachment**

All but one heavy-use participant selected escapism and/or distraction as their main reasons for use. He was adamant to state that he uses media for research and information seeking. Six users were purpose-oriented, and two used Internet media for socializing. There was a mix of secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant/dismissive attachments with heavy-use participants. Attachment was determined by their impression of their relationship with their parents and how present and supportive the parents were. Eight participants could “Always” count on at least one parent, nine believed a parent was “Always” involved in their life, and six felt that their parents were supportive. All participants who selected “Always” for their parental attachment questions were certain of their selections and did not hesitate. These participants had a secure relationship and attachment with their parents. Two participants felt that they could “Somewhat” count on their parents, three said to “Somewhat” trust a parent to be involved, and four felt their parents were at times restrictive. These participants had an anxious/ambivalent

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attachment. Finally, two participants answered that they could “Never” count on a parent and the same two (Participants Nine and Ten) said to have dismissive parents. Both participants expressed their answers with a tone of shame. These two participants shared an avoidant/dismissive attachment.

### **Influence**

Most participants (nine) showed high media knowledge by naming three celebrities, and half showed moderate to low academic knowledge by naming zero or one Nobel prize winner, explorer, or scientist. There is a wide range of influence as answers ranged from low, mediocre, and high. The source for their Prime Ministerial vote came from research, opinions of family, and headlines. Half the participants did research before their vote showing low media influence and half relied on media or others showing high influence. Media seemed to evenly influence in terms of what is determined to be socially acceptable as seven showed low influence as they judged social acceptance by their “Own sense of right and wrong.” Six participants judged it by what others say or do, and therefore having high media influence. Media had little influence over style as eleven participants said to wear what they want “Whether it is in style or not.” Only Participant Three used social media to determine style, demonstrating high media influence, and Participant Six mentioned “Friends” along with “Social media, and whether it is in style or not.” Again, answers ranged from internal sources to external ones.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The results of the study aligned with the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura’s social learning theory (Hu & Huang, 2023). This theory has found links between observational learning, role models, reinforcement, and shaping a person’s behavior and development. Katz and Blumler’s uses and gratification theory provides an understanding of the motives for user

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media selection (Madan & Kapoor, 2021), which was demonstrated in the study. The increase in Internet media accessibility made it a staple in many lives and something that cannot be overlooked. The findings from all three research questions can be applied to the study's theoretical framework.

The collaboration of academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL) (Carpendale et al., 2023) framework seen in Chapter Two involves self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Self-awareness is the capacity to identify emotions and do a realistic self-evaluation. This evaluation entails all questions of the interview as the participants were asked to view themselves and give their opinions. Self-management is controlling one's emotions, which refers directly to Question 25 and emotions that cannot be controlled. Only two participants said to had zero emotions they could not control, while eight had only one, one participant had two, and one had four. The data shows that the majority of participants in the study had good control of their emotions, and therefore, good regulation, even though previous research states that using media for entertainment reduces the ability to self-regulate (Domoff et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2019; Ra et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2022). This qualitative data gives another perspective to the quantitative data that exists.

In terms of social awareness, recognizing emotions in others, and engaging properly with other groups, social value was determined by the ethical question in the survey, with eight participants showing a high social value of others and four who were moderately low. Previous research on self-awareness mentions that it revolves around identifying emotions (Carpendale et al., 2023). The data from the current research shows support for this as most had high social value; therefore, qualitative data shows that media influence did not affect the participant's social valuing of others.

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Establishing and sustaining healthy relationships through relationship skills was seen in the questions on attachment. The results showed a strong showing for secure attachments with their parents demonstrating they should have well-developed social skills as per previous research (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Tang et al., 2022). The current study had ten participants do at least three selfless acts and have positive prosocial behavior giving evidence of truth to Kowert and Oldmeadow's (2015) findings.

Lastly, the participant's ability to make well-informed decisions about their actions was examined through the scenario. Viewing the answers given by the participants if placed in a similar situation investigated their decision-making process. Only two participants would run by and steal food for their families, but both changed their answers when witnesses were around to see their actions. A total of four participants changed their answers when witnesses were around to see. The experiment by Asch (2023) showed results that 35% of the participants would agree with the answer of another even when it was obviously wrong, thereby questioning the power of social influence (Franzen & Mader, 2023; Goodmon et al., 2020). In a study by Franzen and Mader (2023), they saw that this is true with opinions, such as political statements, as well. In a comparison between the current findings and the findings by Asch (2023), there is evidence to support the power of social influence as participants changed their decisions once other people were around. Their presence changed the social dynamic and therefore its influence. Even though there were only four participants who were affected by this, it is 25% of the participants if seen on a larger scale, this could be a large number of people who change their decision-making process based on the social situation. Knowing this adds to the significance of a well-developed social being. If left to gain these skills by media, they may have developmental delays with their autonomy and relationships (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Yang et al., 2022).

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### Demographics

Displacement theory states that children spend more time with media than with parents, and children raised on media become adults on media (Domoff et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2019; Ra et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2022). The results of the study indicate that all twelve participants are heavy users of Internet media. Although it is not possible to determine how much time is or was spent with their parents, the findings support that young adults spend over three hours per day on Internet media. These findings give support to previous research as the participants were spending much of their limited free time with the media. From this it can be seen that the participants were likely heavy media users as children as well and are leading to an adult life with heavy media use and influence. The knowledge that a client has been a heavy user of media throughout their life leads to observing addiction and gives caregivers more information to consider while doing their evaluations.

Media selection at the base is to satisfy a need (Huang & Chang, 2020). The results of the study show that all but one participant uses Internet media to satisfy their need for entertainment. This high demand for entertainment is a distraction or escape from their real lives (Goh et al., 2019; Greenfield, 2022). Considering the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), when actively engaging in media, users tend to be at a higher risk of being influenced. The current research findings show that all twelve participants are heavy users, and six of them do not research their vote for Prime Minister and judge social acceptance through what others say or do. The data corresponds with previous research, as half the participants showed signs of influence.

Attachment to parents and/or guardians affects media use as well. Attachment theory is a lifetime framework for understanding relationships (Barbaro, 2020; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; McClean et al., 2021). The answers given by the participants were confident, with two

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who guiltily said to have a dismissive relationship with their caregivers and a fearful-avoidant attachment. Underdeveloped social skills due to poor attachment, leave the person alone to learn these skills through media (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015; Yang et al., 2021). Both Participants Nine and Ten said to have dismissive relationships and had many similar answers for the rest of the interview as well. They differed in terms of social behavior for editing posts, identity in sharing a similar virtual and real self, influence in knowing media versus academic knowledge, and self-regulation of emotions in their reaction to conflict. It was difficult to see a link between attachment type and influence on development as the responses varied between the only two participants with different attachment styles.

The current research aims to help with treatment and recognition of developmental delays. Impulse control, social connectedness, behavior, reason for media use, and duration of use need to be considered for treatment (Betteman et al., 2020; Dodemaide et al., 2019). Development was addressed through multiple factors, including impulse control, as was seen in the participant's reaction to conflict. Faced with an unexpected or unwarranted event, four of the participants were determined to find another solution, two got angry, and four said they would be sad. Participant Two said both angry and sad and Participant Nine said they would be sad and determined. From these results, it can be viewed that over half of the participants showed their impulse reaction to be negative, as in not effective. The findings showed how ill-prepared young adults are to manage their emotions when faced with dilemmas. If feeling sad and/or angry is the predominant reaction to advisory, this gives insight into why one may look to escape their reality. Previous research saw these areas as points of vulnerability for young adults and the current findings support that.

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Social connection and behavior were portrayed through the number of selfless acts, jealousy, an ethical dilemma, and a scenario for decision-making. Ten of the twelve participants had positive prosocial behavior but were divided between positive and negative social behavior. Eight showed a high social value of others and ten had a deontological view on social behavior. These findings reflect that impulse control and emotional regulation, social behavior, and social value need to be examined. The low frequency of positive behavior in these areas is also seen in the negative self-talk of the participants. The findings shed light on heavy media users and their general positive prosocial and social behavior.

The reason for use was answered directly from Question #2, and “entertainment” had a resounding frequency. All but one participant said to include entertainment as at least one factor for their Internet media use. Also, all twelve participants showed themselves to be heavy Internet media users. These are worrisome findings and support the need to be considered for treatment, as there is great vulnerability to influence due to the reason and frequency of use. Entertainment is a distraction and one that requires less mental focus, allowing for influential messages to have more impact (Nadurak, 2023). The findings show the extent of influence and the vulnerabilities to it for young adults with heavy media use.

### **Behavior**

Social behaviors are learned skills from childhood and are later seen in behavioral issues and social interactions (Carpendale et al., 2023; Wilson & Stock, 2021). Following this point, ten of the twelve participants scored positive prosocial behavior with three or more selfless acts. Similarly, they were internally dependent on their well-being. Half the participants showed positive social behavior by not getting jealous of other’s posts, and eight participants never intended to make others jealous, demonstrating positive social behavior. Previous research stated

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that posted pictures are highly edited (Bell, 2019; Granic et al., 2020; Pera et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2020); however, the current study showed only four participants who spent over ten minutes editing their post while twice as many spent less time or did not edit at all. This discrepancy shows a difference between qualitative and quantitative data.

A point seen in Chapter Two was that having extended time to edit a message can lead to multiple self-presentation strategies (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2015). Four participants said to practice editing before posting and of those four, only two said to “sometimes” try and deliberately make others jealous with their posts. One participant said to be upset and question themselves when they do not receive enough “Likes.” Using “Likes” has turned passive consumers into active contributors through feedback (Kim, 2021; Hayes et al., 2021). This change in user activity has given insight into feedback. Even though many participate in it, not everyone is affected by it, showing the lack of influence.

The neurobiological evidence shows that “Likes” activate the ventral striatum (regulating reward) (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Sherman et al., 2018) and that youth depend on this feedback from social media to heighten their self-esteem, self-worth, and well-being (Bell, 2019; Granic et al., 2020; Pera et al., 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021), but this was not supported in the findings. Only two participants relied on them to not be upset. Increased use of social media was also said to lead to a fear of missing out (Fortsch et al., 2021). Similarly, research by Shanelman et al. (2021) mentioned that a lack of response from a posting left young adults feeling neglected. This statement was not supported in the data found in the current study. Only two participants depended on “Likes” for their well-being, while the remaining ten did not. Only half the participants said to felt jealous while seeing posts of others “having a good time, on a trip, or at an event/activity.” This data does not defend the research by Fortsch et al. (2021). These findings

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show that feedback does not always predict behavior or self-worth as stated in previous research. Knowing this shows the necessity and lays the groundwork for additional research on feedback and how young adult's development is affected by it.

### **Self-image**

It is believed that identity begins with values and beliefs from the home (Granic et al., 2020). This idea was demonstrated through attachment types in the current study. A secure attachment was seen with the participants. A study by Turner (2018) stated that youth depend on media to validate who they are (in part by feedback from social media) (Marquez et al., 2022), and that exploring through media is a main contributing factor to identity formation (Granic et al., 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021), but the findings show otherwise. Four participants answered "False" to using media to explore their identity and the remaining eight said to use it "Somewhat" to explore. These results do not support either statement that they "depend" on it for validation or being a main contributing factor. These findings demonstrate how identity development may change naturally over time and may take a step back from media influence.

The self-discrepancy theory states that a strong virtual identity becomes part of one's self-concept (Qi et al., 2023), and virtual identities are true but exaggerated versions of the real self (Bell, 2019; Pera et al., 2020). Half the participants in the current study found that their virtual self was the same as their real self, while the other half thought this was "Somewhat" true, showing little evidence to support previous research. Perhaps virtual identities are a larger part of an adolescent's self-concept but dissipate over time. Either way, these results show the qualitative aspect of virtual identity over quantitative numbers.

### **Free will**

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Free will also coincide with the Biblical aspect, a fundamental concept in society today (Genschow et al., 2021). Social census had to be considered before responding, and then again when the scenario added the situation of having witnesses to their actions to see if their choices changed. The results show that four participants changed their answers from either “Run past and grab as much as you can” or “Approach the storekeeper and explain your situation hoping he will understand and give you what he can” to “Keep on walking and find another way to help” when there are witnesses present. Even though it was stated that these witnesses were not obstructing their path, participants still changed their answers. This change in decision demonstrates the participant’s actions showing their character (Chen et al., 2023). Not only was free will involved in the decision-making process, but also their identity and socio-emotional development. The participants’ choices reflect who they are, and the behaviors considered their emotions about the situation and their self-regulation of these emotions. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the self-determination theory (SDT), taking ownership of one’s decisions will positively affect well-being (Sheldon & Goffred, 2021). The results showed that half the participants had positive self-talk and the majority had positive prosocial and social behavior.

Influence occurs with the thought process and can alter free will to manipulate a desired agenda. The dual-process theory gives a base view on human understanding, with that, being either intuitive (System 1) or reflective (System 2) (Nadurak, 2023). Intuitive is an automatic instinct to give a quick reaction, and reflective is more deliberate with a conscious effort to be more self-aware. These are processes that Internet media has shown to influence as it often happens while the viewer is sitting and relaxing without giving much thought or energy to what they are viewing allowing for a quick intuitive thought process that tends to accept a message with little to no resistance. As the participants use media for entertainment, they likely have an

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intuitive understanding. To defend against Internet media's influence, individuals need a reflective nature to assess both the quality of the message and the credibility of the messenger.

From major concerns to minute indulgences, media influence is affecting free will. All aspects of identity are vulnerable to social media, including style (Yau et al., 2019). Generally, social conformity tends to happen when there is a group judgment or behavior (Goodmon et al., 2020). While there was a clear division seen in the findings for influence, style clearly showed not to be a factor. Previous research on social conformity was not supported by the findings.

This readiness to be influenced speaks to the vulnerabilities of society as a whole from the bombardment of surrounding media. One's decision-making capabilities are constantly being challenged in one of these two ways. Free will has an effect whether it is known or not (Bras et al., 2019). Identity questioning, behavior, and emotional regulation are being put to the test through Internet media's messages and their motives. Individuals are left to their cognizance to navigate through these communications.

Politics is a great example of this. As discussed in the literature review, political knowledge is typically taken from different media formats (Park & Gil de Zuninga, 2021). Aside from three participants who based their vote on what family said, all others used media for either research or headlines, showing evidence of this point. Although it was not stipulated in the interview questions, the participants who researched their vote, likely did for their party alone and got one-sided information based on previous research (L'Engle et al., 2023).

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) referenced in Chapter Two states that the more actively engaged in media the user is the more vulnerable to influence they are (L'Engle et al., 2023), therefore reducing their free will. Also, 30% of college students are suffering from depression and there has been a correlation seen with their increased social media use (Bettmann

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et al., 2020; Wilso & Stock, 2021). The findings from the current study show that all twelve participants, who are heavy Internet media users, had a positive self-image. Eight participants had only one emotion they could not control, one with two, and one with four, but two had all their emotions under control. Of these uncontrollable emotions, only five participants mention “sadness”. Of those five, three stated having a positive self-talk. These results show a positive attitude despite being heavy media users and, therefore, do not support previous research.

Using media as a source of entertainment and escape was seen to relate to developmental learning in emotional regulation (Shankleman et al., 2021). The current study showed only one participant who did not use media for entertainment but for information seeking only. This participant also said to be determined to find another solution when faced with challenges and the only one to “always” practice mindfulness techniques. This participant also had positive self-talk and only one emotion that he could not control (“anger”). This finding does not directly go against previous research but does show that not only the use for entertainment and escape can help emotional regulation. There are possibly other uses as well such as information seeking.

Social media promotes free will and free speech (Antonetti & Chrisafulli, 2020). The fact that the findings showed only four participants said to edit their posts for at least ten minutes and planned when to post it, gives qualitative support to this finding. If the eight other participants are not bothered by editing their posts or concerned by multiple “Likes”, then it is possible that they are freely posting for their benefit. God gave us free will, but man is trying to influence it.

### **Emotional Regulation**

It was mentioned in Chapter Two that the media is setting young adults up for failure with unreal expectations (Clarke, 2021; Hall, 2019; Lutkenhaus et al., 2020; Tchernev et al., 2021). The solving of major issues with ease and in a short time frame seems ideal but is

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unrealistic. “Sadness” and “anger” were the two main emotions felt by the participants when faced with a difficult situation, demonstrating support for previous research. Less than half, five, were determined to find another solution. With half the participants resorting to sadness or anger when faced with adversity, it shows a weak handle on emotional regulation. If young adults are reacting this way, they may be faced with developmental delays in dealing with their emotions later in life. It will be beneficial to caregivers to be aware of this and adjust treatment to address it.

It was seen in Chapter Two that entertainment viewing plays a role in reducing self-regulation, internalizing disorders, and depression (Domoff et al., 2019; Goh et al., 2019; Ra et al., 2018; Robertson et al., 2022). Although the findings from the study were divided on this matter. Six participants said to have positive self-talk and five had negative, with one participant having both positive and negative. Also, eleven participants said to use media for entertainment, but ten of the twelve participants had only one or fewer emotions they could not control. This result shows evidence of the exact opposite of previous research and how qualitative data is needed to bridge the gap with quantitative data. How entertainment viewing reduces self-regulation would need to be examined in further detail.

### **Decision-Making Process**

In terms of the ethical/moral stance in social acceptance and development, virtues play a commanding role in human functioning (Jonkowski et al., 2021). They are based on motivational, affective, cognitive, relational, behavioral, and contextual dimensions. The participant's ethical stance was seen in the decision-making process theme. One fundamental principle of virtue ethics is that true growth does not result merely from alleviating symptoms; it is linked with the acquired qualities related to human character and excellence (Jonkowski et al.,

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2021). Virtues guide individuals in contemplating their identity and ongoing personal development in their interactions with others. These qualities, in turn, augment one's ability to lead a fulfilling life (Jonkowski et al., 2021). The results from the interviews show in many ways how the participants reflected their virtues. In answering the ethical question and scenario, they showed their character by what they believed to be right or wrong. Having experienced the ethical question directly, Participant Six said, "Because I have been there..., at least a text would be nice." When asked how they decide what is socially acceptable, Participant One said, "I will think critically and assert my own opinion about what is right and wrong. I am not gonna let people convince me otherwise." Participant One's comment shows the degree to which his virtues are a guide for his identity and supports previous data. Real-life experiences, like Participant Six, may be more of a deciding factor in determining social acceptance based on virtues and less in media influence. Real-life experiences may be the solution to some developmental delays due to Internet media influence.

An accumulation of the results shows that there are many factors involved in decision-making, and, therefore, development as well. Many of these factors depend on the others. For instance, emotional regulation, behavior, and social norms (social census) play major roles in dictating moral decision-making (Wang et al., 2021). These moral decisions develop a positive social environment, leading to a development-encouraging society. The results of the ethical question and scenario showed a high social value of others with twice as many participants stating it is not socially acceptable to end a three-month relationship by "ghosting" and that it needs to be done face-to-face. Four participants were moderately low as they felt a text was enough. These results relate to the extent of consequences and social agreement strongly influenced by moral recognition, supporting previous research. Additionally, the risk of

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consequences and social norms significantly affected moral decision-making. Social consensus played a pivotal role in shaping moral decision-making and highlighted its significance in determining the cognitive processes involved.

The dual-process model posits that emotional and cognitive features are involved in ethical decision-making, and the most dominant of the two is the final decision-maker (Wang et al., 2021). Similarly, these two factors affect behavior as well. When a social situation with a high social consensus, individuals make decisions based on what they know and their experience, to meet the social norm. However, if there is a low level of consensus, decisions are made based on emotions. The findings from the study do not show social consensus as the interviews were done individually, but four participants changed their reaction to the scenario when witnesses were present. This decision change is possibly due to the global consensus that it is ethically wrong to steal. Two of the four participants who changed their decision based on witnesses were initially just explaining their situation to the storekeeper and asking for his help. This point shows that shame may play a part in social consensus as well, and affects social behavior, identity, and emotional regulation development.

Chapter Two mentioned how young adults typically rely on media to learn social norms and behaviors (Kim & Lee, 2021). This dependence was seen in the results as all participants were heavy Internet media users, but only two would steal from the store owner. The remaining ten would either explain their situation to the storekeeper or just keep on walking. Also, none of the participants believed it was acceptable to end a relationship by “ghosting” their partner. These findings show that if media influenced the participants for their social norms and behavior, it was a positive influence. This point was the only demonstration of a positive influence from the media.

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### **Implications**

The findings from this study have far-reaching implications for clinical practice and resonate with Biblical teachings, offering a foundational platform for further research into the influence of Internet media and its effect on development. While it is widely acknowledged that media exerts an influence on society, the extent of this impact remains obscure. Additionally, the complex interplay between this influence and social and socio-emotional development has not been fully clarified.

### **Influence**

The data derived from the study serves as a critical building block for understanding this complex relationship. It unveils how young adults, who are among the primary consumers of Internet media, respond to these influences and what they perceive as socially acceptable behavior. This information, in turn, provides valuable insights into the role of media literacy and awareness in shaping social behaviors. Nine participants were able to identify three celebrities with relative ease but naming three academics proved much more difficult with only six being able to name three, with much more effort.

### **Importance of Research for Treatment and Understanding**

Clinical practitioners can gather these insights to enhance treatment methodologies, identify issues related to media consumption and its consequences on development, and implement preventative strategies. By recognizing the profound influence of Internet media on the target demographic, practitioners can tailor their approaches to address the specific challenges posed by media-related issues. Knowing the extensive frequency and reasoning for media use being for distractive purposes will be guiding factors in treatment. Emotional control

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was seen to be an issue when faced with an unexpected event. The current study also shows that anger and sadness are the main emotions that this demographic has trouble controlling.

The findings related to the selection and rationale behind Internet media usage hold significant implications for advancing research in this domain. With a comprehensive understanding of how the average Internet user is influenced and directed toward specific media choices, caregivers (therapists, family/friends, and anyone in a therapeutic role) will have more tools for recognizing and helping with Internet media-caused developmental delays. Through qualitative data obtained via interviews, this research provides direct insights into the motivations underlying media selection. This approach not only uncovers intentional usage patterns but also sheds light on factors such as frequency, duration, and the media type chosen based on emotional states at the moment of selection, among various other aspects. Eleven of the twelve participants use media for entertainment and do so for over three hours per day on average. This data leads us to believe that young adults are looking for escape or distraction from their lives for a large part of their free time. Having direct insight into the motivations for media selection and knowing the factors that contribute to media selection with emotions, in a Biblical context, aligns with the emphasis on self-awareness and moral discernment, encouraging individuals to make thoughtful, intentional choices. In doing so, they take back and assume their free will.

Additionally, the scarcity of qualitative data in current research is addressed, making firsthand information a key asset. Qualitative data, not just numbers, also allows for exploring the multifaceted aspects of human behavior and media consumption, highlighting the importance of self-reflection and moral discernment. Of the five participants who practice mindfulness at least partially, four of them have positive self-talk. Similarly, of the seven participants who never

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used mindfulness techniques, six have negative self-talk. The comparison can be made between practicing mindfulness techniques to control emotions and positive self-talk. It serves to enrich existing quantitative findings and allows for the cross-validation of qualitative data with quantitative results, thus enhancing the strength and reliability of research outcomes.

### **Clinical Need**

From a clinical practice perspective, this research equips practitioners with a deeper comprehension of the complex factors driving media choices, enabling them to recognize and address issues related to media consumption more effectively. Also, this knowledge empowers clinicians to develop more effective prevention strategies. The findings show that young adults consume on average, 3 to 5 hours of Internet media per day and use it as a distraction or an escape. High media use also showed to have varying influential power over certain decisions (voting and social acceptance), and they share similar uncontrollable emotions (sadness and anger).

Current literature frequently lacks a specific emphasis on the aspect of development. When addressed, development tends to be viewed holistically. Consequently, existing research provides a broad overview of the situation but offers limited guidance on effective intervention strategies. The current study focuses specifically on social (identity and social behavior) and socio-emotional (self-regulation of emotions) development.

The pressing need for tools and methods to identify addiction or detect developmental delays was made evident. These tools are essential for offering effective treatment and intervention, even in the absence of a clear consensus regarding what constitutes excessive media consumption. The study's findings reinforce the necessity of developing targeted tools and strategies to assess and address addiction and developmental issues arising from media usage.

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The current results find that although half the participants “Somewhat” feel they share the same online and real-life identity, they all share a very positive self-image. Only four participants said to completely abstain from using Internet media to explore their data, and three of these four felt they strongly shared the same virtual and real identity. Of the eight participants who “Sometimes” use media to explore their identity, three participants positively share an online and virtual identity. These results give evidence that media has some influencing effect on their identity as, even though three participants are not wavering with their identity or media use, eight participants do use media to explore to some degree, and five of those said to have different identities.

The supplementary insights derived from this research domain hold significant potential for improving treatment protocols. Internet media consumption has been linked to diverse forms of developmental delays and addiction (Ferguson et al., 2022; Hunt et al., 2021; Lewis & Sznitman, 2022; Mahon & Hevey, 2021). The results will guide the development of a keen awareness of these issues by becoming proficient in recognizing their early signs. It becomes possible not only to provide more effective treatment but also to show how these issues impact social and socio-emotional development. Knowing the factors contributing to their onset will aid in producing treatment approaches for better outcomes. Understanding how often media is used and why it is being used along with behaviors and emotional regulation will undoubtedly give the caregiver a foundation upon which to build. The push towards new treatment methods with the results from the study mirrors Biblical teachings that emphasize the importance of self-awareness and virtuous living; “Attend to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in both tasks, for by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you” (*New American*

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*Standard Bible, 1971/1995, 1 Timothy, 4:16*). The findings give insight into ethical decision-making.

### **Decision-Making**

A better comprehension of the decision-making process of clients who heavily use media will help in creating new forms of treatment that the client will respond to directly. The participants showed how much Internet media influenced their decision-making process. Voting habits and determining what is socially acceptable were divided among the participants, showing the strength of influence the media has. The findings also show how four participants changed their actions when witnesses were present. Through possibly an unfounded sense of judgment, the participants altered their actions when others saw them. Two of these four were merely talking with the storekeeper and asking for his help, and this was enough to change the participant's actions to "Keep on walking." Considering this power of influence the clients must deal with will help the caregiver to offer treatment that the client is willing to buy into based on their decision-making process.

The research aimed to ultimately contribute to finding better methods for recognizing and treating media-related development delays. As seen in Chapter Two, media use begins at an early age with the number of users and the duration of use increasing. The findings from the current study relate to this as they show the habits of heavy Internet media users. Knowing the reason for use will help in determining the client's needs. Having more information on their behavior and emotional regulation will give an understanding of the client's coping skills. In knowing a client's needs and coping skills, a caregiver can assess a situation more quickly and accurately. Addressing issues early on has been shown to give better results and have less of an impact on development (Harrison et al., 2023).

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### **Church**

The current research brings benefits to the church as well as shedding light on the influence of media that the government can manipulate, the division of church and state are not on equal footing. With growing numbers flocking to the media and a secular world, society is bombarded with messages from the state. Taking its lead from the media while the media is distancing itself from religion, there is very little mention of the power and benefits of the church. Religion is becoming less and less a factor and way of life (Koscielniak et al., 2024; Scannell, 2016). None of the participants mentioned using prayer as a mindfulness technique nor did any of them mention referring to the church to answer questions of their identity, standards for social acceptability, or regulation of emotions. Six participants mentioned using either hearsay or media headlines to decide on their next vote for Prime Minister. Similarly, six participants chose to see what others were saying or doing to decide on social acceptability. In understanding why young adults turn towards media, the church could develop its cultural accessibility.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations to the study. An initial one was that the sample size was limited, and contrast was not established between heavy and moderate users because all participants fell into the heavy user category. The more specific limitations have been categorized.

### **Participants**

#### ***Previous Limitations***

As the study was conducted in a small community in Quebec, the participant population primarily consisted of Caucasian individuals, with many sharing a similar cultural background

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with little diversity. Therefore, the findings may be race-specific. Young adults were shown to be the second most extensive group of Internet media users, as noted by Guthold et al. (2019).

Adolescents are the number one user, but they were not selected for the sample as their development entails many unrelated factors (ex., Hormones as a reason to seek Internet media to escape, underdeveloped brains allowing for higher vulnerabilities, and other similar factors).

### ***New Limitations***

The interviews were also limited to the assumption that the participants provided honest responses. Participants answered regarding their sense of right and wrong when determining social acceptance, but this may be because it was hypothetical, and they were not forced to decide at the moment. There were no real consequences associated with their decisions like in real life (Franzen & Mader, 2023). Additionally, participants may have felt guided in the questioning and attempted to give answers that pleased me instead of giving their honest opinions. Non-verbal cues of the interviewer may have played a role in this issue as well. Lastly, it is unknown how long each participant has identified as a heavy media user. This can have an impact on their development as well.

### **Development**

#### ***Previous Limitations***

The study exclusively focused on social and socio-emotional development, as each of these aspects alone encompassed numerous dimensions. Although Internet media can influence multiple forms of development as it maintains an indirect social connection with nearly everyone (given its broad influence on factors like political voting, which affects even those who actively avoid media). The study was limited to measurements of social and socio-emotional developmental outcomes to strengthen the validity.

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### **Past trauma**

#### *Previous Limitations*

Inquiring about past traumatic experiences would not be ethically correct, as it might potentially unearth repressed memories without proper clinical follow-up. Consequently, individual differences in this regard could not be comprehensively addressed. This research does not account for potential preexisting social challenges that may contribute to excessive Internet media consumption. For example, experiences like abuse or bullying were acknowledged as factors that could impact the frequency, duration, and motivations for using Internet media. The inclusion criteria and interview questions were designed to address these external variables and to distinguish participants who had experienced such past circumstances. However, it is important to note that the questions had limitations in fully capturing and accounting for these complex variables, such as being limited to a subjective understanding of trauma.

### **Testing methods**

#### *Previous Limitations*

A major limitation was that physiological testing or neuro-scanning was not conducted. These tests would have revealed biological responses and brain pathways, as observed through fMRI imaging, concerning thought processes before and after Internet media consumption. This testing approach also would have provided precise data that was not dependent on the participant's memory, honesty, or opinion. The interviews purposely allowed an explanation of the participant's answers, but this still may not have been enough to account for subjectiveness.

#### *New Limitations*

The interview questions and codex for what the answers represent have not been tested nor are they regulated measures. An intercoder has mutually agreed upon the coded answers, but

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this does not assure their conformity. This raised concerns about the validity of the study when relying on recall.

A comparison between heavy and moderate Internet media users was not made as all participants were categorized as heavy users as per the operational definition. The findings do have value nonetheless, as they still show the effects of influence on development for heavy users. To allow for the comparison, the operational definition would need to adjust the average media use per day. This adjustment would extend the moderate use group from zero to two hours to zero to four hours and classify heavy users as those engaging for over five hours.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A key finding from the study was that Internet media has an impact on the decision-making process. Not only does it have a major influence, but it often goes unnoticed. These findings have shown the need for media literacy and awareness. Future research would need to take the line of research on media awareness to demonstrate, and bring to the forefront, the importance of understanding what is being shared and how to defend against propaganda. Studies show that propaganda, educating and convincing society of a public agenda, has been altered to be softer and less blatant through entertaining formats like TV and movies (Zou, 2023). Research dedicated to the influence of Internet media through covert propaganda is necessary to understand it, make it widely known of its existence, and develop and share methods to defend against it to maintain true free will.

A suggestion for future research would be to include questions about the participant's well-being. The current research had few questions to determine how the participants were now. Knowing this will give a better look into how media influence impacts mental health and well-being, thereby giving a more direct look into development. Future research can also expand on

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the effects of video games on their own and break down the time spent on each media type individually. Also, feedback and algorithms give an interesting look into development. These topics are growing areas of media as well.

### **Sample**

The sample represents an initial source of data providing insights into the extent of Internet media's impact on social and socio-emotional development. However, because the sample primarily consisted of White young adults from Quebec, Canada, the findings could not be readily applied to a broader, global context due to the similarities among the participants. Future research would benefit from a larger and more diverse sample with greater variations in sample demographics, or multiple studies, each with a particular demographic, and overall results would be compared to show trends. This comparison between demographics will increase the generalizability of the findings. A large sample may also include heavy and moderate users as well.

Gender differences may exist, and future research could segment the two to discover any similar traits in development. A final consideration for future research would be the impact artificial intelligence (AI) has on media and its influence on development. Deep fakes, AI-generated synthesized media, are on the rise and are a danger to society (fraud, disinformation, and the like) (Bohacek & Farid, 2022). Differentiating misinformation from true information and even photographs (ex., Of politicians) is of concern and has a direct impact on development as trust has become a major issue. A classification of AI as a media type would be required. With further research in this area, the findings would not be limited to one race or age group but could cover gender, multiple ethnicities, and widespread age range, and examine AI's role in influence.

### **Testing Methods**

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The application of biological and physiological testing, including fMRI and heart rate measurements, could have enabled the tracing of the decision-making process and the extraction of precise, non-subjective data. Neurofeedback (biofeedback) measures brain activation from emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functions (Ciccarelli et al., 2023). This type of data can be generalized as it would not rely on subjective factors, allowing for the mapping of blood flow and its activation in different brain regions. Research done with fMRI and readings of blood pressure would produce much more accurate results, giving a direct understanding of the decision-making process and the influence media has on development.

Subsequent research can expand on the existing research by investigating the long-term connections between shifts in personality traits, the environments of social media, and mental well-being. A longitudinal study could show influences at different developmental stages and different levels of intensity. These results would show the long-term effect on development and if there are any delays.

### **Media Type**

To further explore this research area, data can be collected on each type of media and the reasons for its use, such as entertainment, mood regulation (escape), information-seeking, and others. This exploration could be done on each media type individually to show the effects of each on development. Current research is looking at media selection and media effects through the decision theory (Fisher & Hamilton, 2021), although inquiry into media selection and development is recommended. An in-depth understanding of why a media type was chosen and its effect on development will help to narrow what is currently known about influence, and how they delay social and socio-emotional development. A particular media type can be pinpointed to its link to any developmental delay.

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### Summary

In conclusion, the study examined how Internet media occupies a more important role in one's life than is generally believed, how awareness of influence is needed, review the extent of influence on development, and aid in discovering new treatment methods. Recognition of the problems is relatively new and best-practice treatments for media-related developmental delays are still needed. The influence of Internet media was shown to take away free will and manipulate towards a guided agenda. This manipulation is turning society away from God's greatest gift to us and doing exactly what Scripture advised against "For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love" (*New American Standard Bible, 1971/1995; Galatians 5:13*).

The study shows how development, in the form of identity, social behavior, and self-regulation, is influenced by Internet media. Internet media use was shown to influence social standards and behavior as seen in the responses of all twelve participants interviewed. The findings demonstrated the necessity to increase awareness of the power of influence Internet media has on development, and to create new methods to help with treatment as well as diagnosing issues related to heavy media use.

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## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

## APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT INVITATION

Hello,

My name is Michael Ouellette, I am a Ph.D. candidate in developmental psychology at Liberty University and I am conducting a study to understand better the effects media has on different aspects of development.

I am looking for volunteers to participate in a one-on-one interview. I have a few questions to ask about your media habits and decision-making process (e.g. when shopping or voting). The whole interview should last no longer than 20 minutes. Drinks (non-alcoholic) and snacks will be available. All information will remain confidential (no name will be recorded with your answers).

To be eligible, you must not have any clinical diagnosis of mental disorders (ex. ADHD, anxiety, or depression), be between the ages of 18 to 32 years old, identify as a male or female since birth, and not have dealt with life-altering trauma since birth.

If you are interested in partaking in the study, are between the ages of 18 and 32, identify as a male or female, have no prior diagnosis (ex. ADHD, anxiety, depression), and have not experienced life-altering trauma, please email me to schedule a time to meet.

Thank you in advance for your time,

Michael

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long (in hours) do you spend on Internet media per day (averaged for the week)? 0-  
1 \_\_\_\_ 1-2 \_\_\_\_ 3-5 \_\_\_\_ over 5 \_\_\_\_
2. What is the main purpose of your Internet media use? News \_\_\_\_, Entertainment \_\_\_\_,  
Information seeking \_\_\_\_, Communication \_\_\_\_, Other \_\_\_\_
3. How is your relationship with parent/guardian? I felt I could always count on at least one  
parent/guardian \_\_\_\_ I could somewhat count on at least one parent/guardian \_\_\_\_ I could  
not count on either of my parents/guardians to help \_\_\_\_ I kept things to myself \_\_\_\_
4. How often were your parents/guardians around? At least one parent/guardian was always  
there and involved in my life and activities \_\_\_\_ At least one parent/guardian was  
somewhat involved in my life and activities \_\_\_\_ At least one parent/guardian was  
seldomly involved \_\_\_\_ I went through life on my own \_\_\_\_
5. My parents were: Supportive and allowed me to be autonomous \_\_\_\_ At times supportive  
and at times restricted \_\_\_\_ Dismissive and not very supportive \_\_\_\_ Neglectful and/or  
volatile \_\_\_\_
6. How often have you moved to a different city? Zero \_\_\_\_ 1-2 Times \_\_\_\_ Over 3 times \_\_\_\_
7. What is the average amount of selfless acts or acts of kindness you have done in the past  
year? Zero \_\_\_\_ 1 or 2 for the year \_\_\_\_ 3 or 4 for the year \_\_\_\_ more than 4 for the year  
\_\_\_\_
8. Before posting a picture/video to social media, I spend over 10 minutes editing it and  
planning when to post: True \_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_

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9. If I don't get enough "Likes" from my post, I will be upset and question myself: True \_\_\_\_  
False \_\_\_\_
10. I feel jealous when I see postings of others having a good time, on a trip, or at an  
event/activity: True \_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_
11. Do you post things in the hope of making others jealous? All the time \_\_\_\_ Sometimes  
\_\_\_\_ Never \_\_\_\_
12. My online self is the same as my real-life self: True \_\_\_\_ Somewhat \_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_
13. Social media allows me to explore my identity and do/say things I wouldn't in real life:  
True \_\_\_\_ Somewhat \_\_\_\_ False \_\_\_\_
14. How do you think others see you? Fun \_\_\_\_ Socially awkward \_\_\_\_ Approachable \_\_\_\_ Not  
approachable \_\_\_\_ Kind \_\_\_\_ Friendly \_\_\_\_ Hostile \_\_\_\_ Empathetic (good listener) \_\_\_\_  
Genuine \_\_\_\_ Assertive \_\_\_\_ Funny \_\_\_\_ Easy-going \_\_\_\_ Intelligent \_\_\_\_ Optimistic \_\_\_\_  
Pessimistic \_\_\_\_ Arrogant \_\_\_\_ Condescending \_\_\_\_ Detached \_\_\_\_ Dismissive \_\_\_\_  
Narcissistic \_\_\_\_
15. How do you see yourself? Honest \_\_\_\_ Anti-social \_\_\_\_ Cynical (expecting the worse from  
everything) \_\_\_\_ Hard to please \_\_\_\_ Grumpy \_\_\_\_ Impatient \_\_\_\_ Touchy (Quick to anger)  
\_\_\_\_ Inconsiderate \_\_\_\_ Lazy \_\_\_\_ Artificial \_\_\_\_ Bossy \_\_\_\_ Determined \_\_\_\_ Diplomatic  
\_\_\_\_ Helpful \_\_\_\_ Loyal \_\_\_\_ Likeable \_\_\_\_ Patient \_\_\_\_ Sincere \_\_\_\_ Considerate \_\_\_\_ Fun to  
be around \_\_\_\_
16. How many close friends do you have? Zero \_\_\_\_ 1-2 \_\_\_\_ 3-5 \_\_\_\_ More than 5 \_\_\_\_
17. Can you name your 3 favorite famous personalities; in any area? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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18. Can you name 3 of any Noble Prize winners, Scientists, or Explorers? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
19. For your first or next vote for Prime Minister, where do you plan to get your information for the basis of your vote? I already know I'm not voting for the same person because of what I heard he has done \_\_\_\_ I already know I'm not voting for the same person because of what I learned through research \_\_\_\_ From information I will gather through different research \_\_\_\_ From what family and friends have told me \_\_\_\_ From what I see/hear from news bytes (Facebook posts, Newspaper headlines, short video clips online, or other form of headline surfing) \_\_\_\_
20. When deciding what is socially acceptable, I: Look around me and see what others are doing \_\_\_\_ I was raised with a sense of right and wrong and base my decisions on that \_\_\_\_ I'll ask around and see what others are saying \_\_\_\_
21. When deciding what is in style, I decide based on: What I have seen in movies \_\_\_\_ What I see on social media \_\_\_\_ What I see friends wearing in real life \_\_\_\_ I get what I want, whether it is in style or not \_\_\_\_
22. How do you react when something does not go your way or not the way I want/expect? I get angry\_\_\_\_ I get sad\_\_\_\_ I give up\_\_\_\_ I am determined to find another way\_\_\_\_
23. Do you practice mindfulness (meditation, yoga, prayer) to manage your emotions? All the time\_\_\_\_ Sometimes\_\_\_\_ Never\_\_\_\_
24. Do you have a positive/healthy self-talk, or is it negative? Positive\_\_\_\_ Negative\_\_\_\_
25. Are there any emotions you have a hard time controlling (ex. Road rage)?

**Ethical question**

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

Is ending a three-month relationship by “ghosting” the other person socially acceptable?

- A. Yes
- B. No. After three months the person deserves to be told face-to-face.
- C. No. At least send a text.
- D. No, but I would still do it.
- E. Your suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_

**Scenario**

Your parents have both recently lost their jobs. They are unable to find new ones and can no longer afford to live in your home. With no other place to go, you, your younger sister, and your parents are forced to live in an old camper you had and must travel from place to place. Food is scarce and one day when you are walking home from school, you see baskets full of food in front of a store to entice customers to go inside. You notice the storekeeper is not far away but has his back turned for the moment and none of the baskets are tied down. What do you do?

- A. Run past and grab as much as you can.
- B. Push the storekeeper down so you can take your time and get what your family needs most.
- C. Approach the storekeeper and explain your situation hoping he will understand and give you what he can.
- D. Keep on walking and find another way to help the family situation.
- E. Your suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_

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Now imagine the same scenario, but with people around, not in your way, but crossing the street or walking down the sidewalk. What would you do?

- A. Run past and grab as much as you can.
- B. Push the storekeeper down so you can take your time and get what your family needs most.
- C. Approach the storekeeper and explain your situation hoping he will understand and give you what he can.
- D. Keep on walking and find another way to help the family situation.
- E. Your suggestion: \_\_\_\_\_

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW RESPONSE CODING

Questions 1-6 are on use and attachment, 7-11 are social, 12-16 are on identity, 17-21 are on influence, and 22-25 are on self-regulation of emotions.

Coding:

1. How long (in hours) do you spend on Internet media per day (averaged for the week)?

Two hours or less is moderate use, and 3 and above is heavy use.

2. What is the main purpose of your Internet media use? News \_\_\_\_, Entertainment \_\_\_\_,

Information seeking \_\_\_\_, Communication \_\_\_\_, Other \_\_\_\_

News and Information-seeking are purpose-oriented, Entertainment is distraction and/or escape, and Communication is socializing.

3. How is your relationship with parent/guardian?

Counting on at least one parent is a secure attachment, At least one parent could be counted on is an anxious/ambivalent attachment, Could not count on either parent is an avoidant/dismissive attachment, and Keeping things to themselves is fearful-avoidant/disordered attachment.

4. How often were your parents/guardians around?

At least one parent was always involved is secure attachment, At least one parent was sometimes involved is anxious/ambivalent attachment, At least one parent was seldom involved is avoidant/dismissive attachment, and Went through life alone is fearful-avoidant/disordered attachment.

5. My parents were:

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Supportive is secure attachment, only sometimes supportive is anxious attachment, dismissive is dismissive-avoidant attachment, and neglectful is fearful-avoidant attachment.

6. How often have you moved to a different city?

Moved two or fewer times is stable, three or more is frequent, and potentially a reason for escapism and excessive Internet media use. These participants will be excluded from the study.

7. What is the average amount of selfless acts or acts of kindness you have done in the past year?

Two or fewer are negligent and are low in prosocial behaviors, and three or more are positive prosocial behaviors.

8. Before posting a picture/video to social media, I spend over 10 minutes editing it and planning when to post:

True is externally dependent on others (negative) for social acceptance, and False is internally dependent (positive).

9. If I don't get enough "Likes" from my post, I will be upset and question myself:

True is socially dependent on others (negative), and False is internally dependent (positive).

10. I feel jealous when I see postings of others having a good time, on a trip, or at an event/activity:

True is negative social behavior, and False is positive.

11. Do you post things in the hope of making others jealous?

All the time is negative social behavior, Sometimes is neutral, and Never is positive.

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12. My online self is the same as my real-life self:

True is a secure identity (positive), Somewhat is a fluctuating identity (neutral), and False is a dual identity (negative).

13. Social media allows me to explore my identity and do/say things I wouldn't in real life:

True is using social media as a form of exploration, Somewhat is a trial, and False is a secure identity.

14. How do you think others see you?

A positive self-image will be operationally defined as a participant with a higher average of positive adjectives and the opposite for a negative self-image.

15. How do you see yourself?

A positive self-image will be operationally defined as a participant with a higher average of positive adjectives and the opposite for a negative self-image.

16. How many close friends do you have?

Zero friends is secluded, One to five is average, and Five or more is outgoing.

17. Can you name your 3 favorite famous personalities; in any area?

All three is high in media knowledge, One or two is moderate, and None is low.

18. Can you name 3 of any Noble Prize winners, Scientists, or Explorers?

All three is high in academic knowledge, One or two is moderate, and None is low.

19. For your first or next vote for Prime Minister, where do you plan to get your information for the basis of your vote?

Already knowing their next vote due to media is extremely high Internet media influence, Research is low Internet media influence, Hearsay is high influence, Headlines and news bytes is mediocre influence.

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20. When deciding what is socially acceptable, I:

Looking at others for guidance is high Internet media influence, Own sense of right and wrong is low Internet media influence, and Asking others is moderate Internet media influence.

21. When deciding what is in style, I decide based on:

Based on movies and social media is a high Internet media influence, What friends are wearing has moderate Internet media influence, and own style is a low Internet media influence.

22. How they react when things do not go their way:

Anger is loss of control, Sad/Give up is lack of control, Determination is complete control (loss control = once having, but losing it in the moment. Lack of control is to never have it in the first place)

23. Practice mindfulness:

All the time is strong regulating skills, Sometimes is average regulating skills, and never is bad regulating skills

24. Self-talk:

Positive is a healthy well-being, Negative is a unwell-being, Do not know/both is an average well-being

25. Uncontrollable emotions:

None is controlled self-regulation, 1 or 2 is a balanced self-regulation, if 3 or more it is uncontrolled self-regulation

### **Ethical Dilemma**

Is ending a three-month relationship by “ghosting” the other person socially acceptable?

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

- If Yes, the participant has a low social value of others.
- If No, the participant has a high social value of others.
- If No. At least send a text. The participant has a moderately -low social value of others.
- If No, but I would still do it. The participant has a high social value of others and high self-awareness, but low prosocial behavior.

### Scenario

- If the participant would: Run past and grab as much as you can. They have a utilitarian view.
- If the participant would: Push the storekeeper down so you can take your time and get what your family needs most. They have a utilitarian view, plus they show signs of ruthlessness and navel-gazing.
- If the participant would: Approach the storekeeper and explain your situation hoping, he will understand and give you what he can. They have a deontological view and are showing signs of forthcoming and openness.
- If the participant: Keeps on walking and finds another way to help the family situation. They are showing signs of deontological.

From the results and this coding scheme, the data will give a well-rounded image of the participant.

## INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEDIA

## APPENDIX D: LETTER OF REQUEST TO INTERVIEW STUDENTS

To whom it may concern,

As a Ph.D. student in developmental psychology at Liberty University, I would like to send an invitation to the student body advising them of a study I will be doing. The purpose of the study is to learn more about the influence Internet media has on college students. I would like to interview a minimum of ten (10) possible students who meet the inclusion criteria. Interviews will continue until saturation of new information is reached. To be eligible for the study, one must be:

Between the ages of 18 to 24 years old, never had any prior diagnoses, never had traumatic events, and identify as male or female since birth.

The interviews are voluntary and confidential, no names will be recorded. The participants can stop the interview at any time, and they will all be made aware of the purpose of the study beforehand. Once their answers are recorded and filed, they will not be able to retrieve them as the answers are anonymous; there is no way of determining which responses belong to the participant.

Before the start of the study, an internal review board at Liberty University will also verify the validity and ethical standards of the interview questions and study as a whole.

Thank you and I await your permission before moving forward with the invitations.

Michael Ouellette