

Youth Mental Health in the Age of Social Media

Thura Aung¹

Department of Communication and Social Studies, University of Yangon, Yangon, Myanmar.

*Corresponding Author Email: thura.aung@uy.edu.mm

Abstract

Youth mental health has become an increasingly significant concern in contemporary societies as levels of psychological distress among young people continue to rise. At the same time, digital communication environments have transformed how emotional experiences are expressed, interpreted, and circulated within society. This study aims to examine how youth mental health discourse in social media functions as a communicative indicator of broader societal transformation. The research adopts a qualitative design using secondary data from academic literature and documented analyses of digital discourse related to youth mental health. Guided by Social Construction of Reality theory, the study analyzes how communication processes shape shared interpretations of emotional experiences among young people. Data were examined through thematic interpretation to identify patterns linking youth narratives, digital communication environments, and societal pressures. The findings show that youth mental health discourse in digital communication spaces connects individual emotional experiences with broader structural challenges, increasing public visibility and influencing societal awareness of youth wellbeing issues. The study concludes that youth mental health discourse operates as a communicative signal reflecting wider social transformations mediated through digital communication environments. These findings contribute to the integration of communication studies and youth mental health research by highlighting the role of discourse in shaping public recognition of emerging social problems.

Keyword

Youth mental health; Social media; Communication; Society.

1. Introduction

Youth mental health has become an increasingly visible issue in contemporary societies as young people experience rising levels of psychological distress, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability (Weigle & Shafi, 2023; Zeng, 2025). Many scholars and policy reports have emphasized that these patterns cannot be understood only as individual psychological problems but must also be interpreted within broader social transformations (Chhabra et al., 2025; Jing & He, 2025). Rapid technological change, economic uncertainty, and shifting social expectations have altered the environments in which young people develop and construct their identities (Zeng, 2025). At the same time, digital communication platforms have become central spaces where young people interact, express emotions, and negotiate social meanings (Butt et al., 2025; Jing & He, 2025). These communication environments shape how experiences of stress, belonging, and wellbeing are articulated in everyday life (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). In many societies, social media platforms function not only as tools for communication but also as arenas where personal and collective



Received: 08 January 2026

Revised: 03 February
2026

Published: 03 March 2026

© Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited.

narratives about mental health emerge (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Through these digital spaces, young people increasingly share experiences, seek support, and publicly discuss emotional challenges (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Popat & Tarrant, 2022). As a result, youth mental health has become intertwined with contemporary communication ecosystems (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Understanding this phenomenon therefore requires attention to both psychological conditions and the communication contexts in which these conditions are expressed.

The growing public concern about youth mental health reflects the recognition that mental wellbeing among young populations has broader societal implications (Chhabra et al., 2025). Rising reports of loneliness, anxiety, and emotional instability among young people have been described as indicators of deeper social tensions within modern societies (Zeng, 2025). Young people occupy a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, making them particularly sensitive to structural shifts in education systems, labour markets, and technological environments (Orben et al., 2024). Because of this sensitivity, changes in youth wellbeing often reveal emerging pressures within the wider social system. In this sense, youth mental health can be interpreted not only as a health issue but also as a reflection of social transformation. Digital communication environments intensify this dynamic by providing platforms where emotional experiences are publicly expressed and collectively interpreted (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). Social media discussions frequently reveal concerns about academic pressure, future uncertainty, social comparison, and identity struggles (Popat & Tarrant, 2022; Weigle & Shafi, 2023; Zeng, 2025). These narratives demonstrate how communication environments influence the ways young people articulate their experiences. The increasing visibility of these narratives suggests that youth mental health discourse is closely connected to broader societal conditions.

Existing research has produced significant knowledge about the prevalence and developmental characteristics of mental health problems among young people. Studies consistently show that many mental disorders first emerge during adolescence and early adulthood, a period marked by major biological, psychological, and social transitions (Zeng, 2025). Researchers have also highlighted the role of environmental stressors such as social inequality, academic pressure, and unstable employment in shaping youth wellbeing (Jing & He, 2025). In recent years, scholars have additionally examined the relationship between digital media use and psychological health (Keles et al., 2019; Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Some studies suggest that social media can contribute to stress through social comparison and exposure to negative content (Popat & Tarrant, 2022; Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Other research indicates that digital platforms may provide emotional support, peer connection, and access to mental health information (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Khalaf et al., 2023). These findings demonstrate that communication technologies have become embedded in the everyday experiences of young people (Butt et al., 2025; Nesi, 2020). Consequently, youth mental health cannot be fully understood without considering the communication environments in which young people participate. Despite this growing awareness, much of the existing literature continues to focus primarily on clinical or epidemiological perspectives.

While current scholarship acknowledges the influence of digital media on youth wellbeing, important questions remain insufficiently explored. In particular, there is limited understanding of how youth mental health is constructed and interpreted through communication processes in digital environments. Many studies treat social media as a factor influencing psychological outcomes rather than as a space where meanings about mental health are actively produced and negotiated. This perspective

overlooks the role of discourse, narratives, and shared interpretations in shaping how mental health experiences are understood. Online discussions about stress, anxiety, and emotional wellbeing often reflect broader cultural and social anxieties. These conversations may reveal how young people collectively interpret the pressures they face in contemporary society. However, systematic conceptual analysis of these communication dynamics remains relatively limited. Without examining how youth mental health is discussed and framed in digital communication spaces, important aspects of the phenomenon remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need for research that treats communication processes as central to understanding youth mental health discourse.

Another limitation in the existing literature concerns the interpretation of youth mental health as a societal signal. Although scholars have suggested that rising distress among young people reflects structural social changes, empirical research rarely investigates how these signals are communicated and interpreted in public discourse. Youth mental health is often framed primarily as a clinical problem requiring medical intervention. Such perspectives may overlook the ways in which communication environments reveal broader social concerns through everyday narratives. Social media platforms frequently host discussions about uncertainty, economic insecurity, environmental anxiety, and changing social expectations (Zeng, 2025). These conversations illustrate how young people connect personal emotional experiences with wider societal issues. However, few studies systematically examine how these narratives function as indicators of social transformation. As a result, the relationship between youth mental health discourse and societal change remains conceptually underdeveloped. Addressing this gap requires analytical approaches that integrate insights from communication studies with youth mental health research.

A further challenge involves understanding how digital communication environments shape public perceptions of youth mental health. Online platforms enable rapid circulation of stories, advice, and personal testimonies related to mental wellbeing (Perlmutter et al., 2024). Through hashtags, discussion forums, and community networks, young people participate in conversations that shape collective interpretations of psychological experiences (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). These interactions influence how mental health problems are recognised, labelled, and understood (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). For example, certain emotional experiences may become widely recognised through repeated discussion and shared narratives. At the same time, digital discourse can also amplify particular interpretations of distress while marginalising others. This process illustrates how communication environments contribute to the social framing of mental health issues. Yet, the mechanisms through which these meanings are constructed remain insufficiently examined. Exploring these mechanisms requires theoretical perspectives that focus on communication and meaning-making processes.

To address these conceptual limitations, this study applies Social Construction of Reality theory as its guiding theoretical framework. This perspective suggests that social realities are not fixed entities but are continuously created and negotiated through communication and interaction. Meanings about social issues emerge through discourse, shared interpretation, and collective understanding. Within digital environments, communication technologies facilitate rapid exchanges of narratives, opinions, and experiences that contribute to the construction of social knowledge. When young people discuss anxiety, stress, or emotional struggles online, they participate in processes that shape how these experiences are interpreted by others. These discussions may transform personal feelings into socially recognised categories of experience. Through repeated

communication, certain interpretations of youth mental health become normalised or widely accepted. Applying Social Construction theory allows researchers to examine how mental health discourse is produced and circulated within digital communication spaces.

Using this theoretical lens, the study seeks to explore how youth mental health is communicated and interpreted within contemporary media environments. The research focuses on examining how social media discourse reflects broader societal pressures affecting young populations. It aims to analyse the narratives through which young people articulate experiences of stress, uncertainty, and emotional vulnerability. In doing so, the study also considers how these narratives contribute to public understanding of youth mental health issues. The research questions therefore address how digital communication shapes the social construction of youth mental health and how these constructions reflect broader societal transformations. By examining communication processes, the study seeks to illuminate the relationship between individual experiences and collective interpretations of wellbeing. This approach emphasises the importance of discourse in shaping how mental health problems are recognised and discussed in society. Understanding these processes provides insight into how youth experiences become visible within public communication spaces.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing prominence of youth mental health within global public debates. Governments, educators, and health institutions have recognised the growing importance of addressing psychological wellbeing among young populations (Chhabra et al., 2025). However, policy discussions often emphasise treatment and prevention without fully considering the communication environments in which youth experiences are articulated. Social media platforms now play a central role in shaping how mental health issues are perceived and discussed (Nesi, 2020; Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Analysing these communication dynamics can therefore provide deeper insight into the cultural and social dimensions of youth wellbeing. Such understanding can also contribute to more comprehensive interpretations of the relationship between digital environments and psychological experiences. By integrating perspectives from communication studies and youth mental health research, this study seeks to expand existing conceptual approaches. Examining youth mental health discourse as a socially constructed phenomenon highlights how communication environments influence the interpretation of emotional experiences. This perspective contributes to a broader understanding of youth mental health as both a personal and societal issue shaped through communication processes.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a conceptual and interpretive analytical framework to explore how youth mental health is constructed within contemporary communication environments. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on understanding meanings, narratives, and discursive patterns rather than measuring statistical relationships (Gephart & Saylor, 2020; Lewis, 2015). Youth mental health discourse on social media reflects complex social experiences, interpretations, and cultural meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone. The study therefore adopts an interpretive perspective guided by Social Construction of Reality theory, which emphasizes how social meanings emerge through communication and interaction (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). This theoretical framework allows the research to examine how mental health experiences are articulated, framed, and shared within digital communication spaces. By focusing on discourse and meaning-making processes, the qualitative design enables a deeper

exploration of how youth mental health narratives reflect broader societal transformations. Such an approach is particularly suitable for investigating communication phenomena where context, interpretation, and social interaction play central roles (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017).

The study relies on secondary qualitative data derived from academic literature and documented digital discourse analyses related to youth mental health and social media communication (Ruggiano & Perry, 2017). Data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly reviews, policy reports, and conceptual studies discussing youth mental health trends and digital communication environments. The units of analysis consist of scholarly discussions, conceptual arguments, and documented descriptions of youth mental health discourse within social media contexts. Data collection was conducted through a systematic identification and selection of relevant literature that addresses the intersection between youth wellbeing, communication environments, and societal change (Cheong et al., 2023). The analytical focus is structured around several conceptual dimensions, including representations of youth mental health, narratives of psychological distress in digital communication, and interpretations of societal pressures reflected in online discourse. These dimensions function as analytical categories used to organize and interpret the collected materials (Azungah, 2018). The primary instrument in this research is the researcher's analytical framework, which guides the process of identifying themes and patterns within the selected literature (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Through this framework, the study examines how youth mental health discourse is described and interpreted across existing research.

To ensure trustworthiness and analytical rigor, several strategies were applied during the research process (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Bingham, 2023). Credibility was supported through the use of diverse and reputable academic sources, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in established scholarly discussions. Dependability was maintained by applying a consistent analytical framework across all reviewed materials, allowing systematic comparison of themes and conceptual arguments (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Confirmability was strengthened through transparent documentation of the literature selection process and analytical procedures, reducing the risk of subjective bias in interpretation (Assarroudi et al., 2018). In addition, the study emphasizes theoretical coherence by aligning the analysis with the guiding principles of Social Construction of Reality theory. Ethical considerations were also taken into account throughout the research process. Because the study relies exclusively on secondary data from publicly available academic sources, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants (Morgan, 2022). Nevertheless, ethical standards were maintained by properly acknowledging all sources, respecting intellectual property, and ensuring accurate representation of previous research. Issues of informed consent and confidentiality were addressed by relying only on published materials that are already ethically cleared for public academic use (Ruggiano & Perry, 2017).

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Social Media Discourse and the Social Construction of Youth Mental Health

Understanding youth mental health in contemporary societies requires attention to the communication environments in which young people express and interpret emotional experiences. Social Construction of Reality theory provides a useful conceptual lens for examining how meanings surrounding mental health emerge through discourse, interaction, and shared interpretation. From this perspective, mental health is not only a

biomedical condition but also a socially negotiated category shaped through everyday communication (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Digital platforms have expanded the arenas in which such negotiations occur, allowing personal experiences to circulate widely through narratives, discussions, and symbolic expressions (Butt et al., 2025). These communication processes shape how psychological distress is recognized, labelled, and collectively understood (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Within youth communities, social media has become an important site where emotional struggles are articulated and interpreted through shared language and cultural references. The analytical focus therefore lies in examining how discourse within these environments contributes to the construction of youth mental health as a socially visible phenomenon. By applying this theoretical perspective, the analysis explores how communication practices transform individual experiences into collective narratives that reflect broader social dynamics.

The analysis of existing literature reveals that social media environments function as spaces where young people publicly articulate emotional experiences related to stress, uncertainty, and identity formation. Studies consistently report that digital platforms host extensive discussions about anxiety, academic pressure, loneliness, and future insecurity (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Zeng, 2025). These narratives often emerge through informal storytelling, peer interactions, and shared expressions of vulnerability (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Rather than remaining private psychological experiences, emotional struggles become communicative events that circulate within networked communities. Through repeated discussion, these experiences gain social recognition and become part of shared cultural understanding (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). This process reflects the central principle of Social Construction theory, which suggests that meanings become stabilized through collective interaction and interpretation. In online environments, repeated narratives about mental health gradually shape common vocabulary and interpretive frameworks among youth (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). The visibility of these discussions contributes to the perception that youth mental health concerns are widespread and socially significant. Consequently, digital communication spaces amplify the social presence of psychological experiences that might otherwise remain invisible.

Another important observation emerging from the literature concerns the role of digital communication in connecting personal experiences with broader societal concerns. Youth narratives frequently link individual emotional distress with structural pressures such as educational competition, economic insecurity, and uncertainty about future opportunities (Khalaf et al., 2023; Zeng, 2025). These connections illustrate how online discourse transforms personal feelings into reflections of collective social conditions. Young people often interpret their experiences within broader narratives of generational anxiety or societal instability (Chhabra et al., 2025). Through discussion threads, comments, and shared content, individual emotions become embedded within larger interpretive frameworks about contemporary life. This communicative process highlights the relationship between psychological experiences and social context (Orben et al., 2024). From a social constructionist perspective, such narratives illustrate how meanings about mental health are shaped through interpretive dialogue rather than isolated individual experiences. The discourse therefore functions as a mechanism through which societal pressures are translated into recognizable emotional categories. In this way, youth mental health becomes a communicative indicator of broader social transformations.

Digital communication environments also influence how mental health experiences are normalized and validated within youth communities. Repeated exposure to similar narratives can create shared expectations about emotional struggles during adolescence and early adulthood (Orben et al., 2024). Online communities often provide

spaces where individuals affirm each other's experiences, reinforcing the perception that certain forms of distress are common among young people (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Jing & He, 2025). These interactions can produce supportive networks that reduce feelings of isolation and encourage open discussion of mental health challenges (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). At the same time, normalization processes may also shape the language through which emotional experiences are interpreted. Concepts such as burnout, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion become widely recognized descriptors within online discourse. The circulation of these terms reflects how communication environments contribute to the formation of collective interpretive frameworks (Butt et al., 2025). Through this process, psychological experiences gain social legitimacy and become integrated into shared cultural narratives. Social Construction theory helps explain how these communicative dynamics transform subjective feelings into socially meaningful categories. The normalization of mental health discourse therefore illustrates the central role of communication in shaping public understanding of psychological wellbeing.

The analysis also indicates that social media discourse contributes to the increasing visibility of youth mental health as a public issue. Online narratives frequently attract attention from broader audiences, including educators, policymakers, and health professionals (Chhabra et al., 2025; Nesi, 2020). As discussions circulate across digital networks, personal testimonies can evolve into widely shared representations of generational challenges. These narratives often highlight concerns about academic performance, economic uncertainty, and rapidly changing social expectations (Zeng, 2025). Such discussions can influence how society interprets the wellbeing of younger generations. From a social constructionist perspective, the visibility of these narratives plays a crucial role in shaping public recognition of social problems. When emotional struggles become widely discussed within communication networks, they gain legitimacy as collective concerns rather than isolated individual experiences. The amplification of youth mental health discourse through digital platforms therefore contributes to broader societal awareness (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). This process demonstrates how communication environments influence the public framing of psychological wellbeing.

At the same time, the literature suggests that digital communication environments also introduce complexities in how youth mental health is interpreted. The rapid circulation of narratives may sometimes simplify or generalize experiences of psychological distress (Perlmutter et al., 2024). Online discussions often rely on concise expressions, symbolic language, or widely shared labels that may not capture the full complexity of mental health conditions (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). This dynamic can shape how individuals interpret their own experiences in relation to dominant narratives circulating online. Some young people may adopt widely recognized descriptors to make sense of emotional states that are difficult to articulate. From a social constructionist viewpoint, this phenomenon illustrates how communicative contexts influence the categories through which experiences are interpreted. The meaning of mental health therefore emerges through ongoing interaction between personal experiences and shared discourse. Communication environments do not merely reflect psychological conditions but actively shape how those conditions are defined and understood (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). This interaction highlights the importance of examining discourse when analysing youth mental health phenomena.

These findings extend existing theoretical discussions about the relationship between communication environments and social problem construction. Previous research has emphasized the influence of digital media on psychological wellbeing

primarily through behavioural or exposure-based explanations (Keles et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2021). The present analysis instead highlights the interpretive dimension of digital communication by demonstrating how discourse contributes to the social recognition of youth mental health concerns. By applying Social Construction of Reality theory, the findings illustrate how communication processes transform individual emotional experiences into collectively meaningful narratives. This perspective refines existing approaches by emphasizing the role of discourse in shaping how mental health issues are understood within society. The analysis also confirms earlier observations that youth emotional experiences are closely connected to structural pressures associated with contemporary social change (Jing & He, 2025). At the same time, it expands existing literature by showing how digital communication environments mediate the relationship between personal experiences and societal interpretation. Through this communicative mediation, youth mental health becomes visible as a socially constructed indicator of broader societal dynamics.

In relation to the broader governance context, the findings suggest that communication environments play an increasingly important role in shaping public understanding of youth wellbeing. Policymakers and institutions often rely on statistical indicators and clinical diagnoses when assessing mental health trends (Chhabra et al., 2025). However, digital discourse provides an additional layer of insight into how young people interpret their own experiences and societal conditions (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Online narratives reveal concerns and anxieties that may not be fully captured through traditional institutional measurements. Recognizing these communicative signals can therefore enhance the capacity of governance systems to understand emerging social challenges affecting younger populations (Jing & He, 2025). Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how youth mental health discourse reflects ongoing transformations in economic, technological, and cultural structures. By examining these narratives through a social constructionist lens, the study contributes to bridging the gap between communication studies and youth mental health research. This approach deepens theoretical understanding of how psychological experiences are embedded within communicative processes and societal change.

3.2 Youth Mental Health as a Communicative Indicator of Societal Transformation

Understanding youth mental health as a societal indicator requires examining how emotional experiences expressed by young people are connected to broader social transformations. Social Construction of Reality theory suggests that meanings about social problems emerge through communication processes in which individuals interpret their experiences collectively (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Within digital communication environments, young people frequently articulate concerns about social pressures, uncertainty, and identity challenges (Zeng, 2025). These narratives do not merely reflect personal emotional states but also reveal underlying social dynamics shaping contemporary youth experiences (Chhabra et al., 2025). Through online discussions, individual struggles become linked with broader themes such as educational competition, economic insecurity, technological change, and shifting social expectations (Jing & He, 2025). As these narratives circulate across communication networks, they contribute to the construction of shared interpretations about generational wellbeing (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). In this context, youth mental health discourse functions as a communicative signal that reflects wider societal conditions (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). To clarify how these communication processes connect individual experiences with

structural transformations, the following table summarizes the interpretive functions through which youth mental health discourse operates as an indicator of societal change.

Table 1. Communicative Functions of Youth Mental Health Discourse in Reflecting Societal Transformation

Communicative Dimension	Manifestation in Youth Discourse	Societal Transformation Reflected	Interpretive Function
Expression of Emotional Experience	Narratives about anxiety, stress, loneliness, and uncertainty shared through social media discussions	Intensifying psychological pressures associated with contemporary social environments	Makes invisible emotional struggles visible within public communication
Collective Interpretation of Pressure	Discussions linking personal distress to academic expectations, economic instability, or social comparison	Structural pressures emerging from education systems, labour markets, and digital culture	Translates individual experiences into shared generational concerns
Circulation of Shared Narratives	Repetition of similar themes across digital platforms such as burnout, anxiety, and uncertainty	Growing cultural awareness of youth wellbeing challenges	Stabilizes common interpretive frameworks for understanding mental health
Public Visibility of Youth Experiences	Viral discussions, hashtags, and widespread online storytelling	Expansion of public awareness regarding youth psychological vulnerability	Amplifies youth experiences into socially recognized public issues
Generational Framing of Wellbeing	Narratives portraying youth mental health as a generational challenge shaped by social change	Transformation of social expectations, economic structures, and technological environments	Positions youth mental health as a signal of broader societal instability

Source: Processed by the researcher, 2026

The communicative patterns summarized in the table illustrate how youth mental health discourse operates as a bridge between personal emotional experiences and broader societal interpretation. Through digital communication platforms, young people articulate feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and uncertainty that are frequently linked to structural pressures in contemporary society (Zeng, 2025). These narratives do not remain isolated expressions of distress but become part of collective conversations that shape public understanding of youth wellbeing (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). As similar stories circulate repeatedly across communication networks, they contribute to the formation of shared interpretive frameworks through which emotional experiences are understood (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). This process reflects the central principle of Social Construction theory, which emphasizes that meanings about social issues emerge through interaction and discourse (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). When young people connect personal feelings to broader societal pressures, they transform individual experiences into indicators of collective social conditions. The visibility of these narratives therefore provides insight into how structural transformations are experienced and interpreted by younger generations (Jing & He, 2025). In this way, youth mental health discourse becomes a communicative lens through which broader social tensions are revealed.

The interpretation of youth mental health as a societal signal also highlights the role of communication environments in shaping how generational experiences are

understood. Digital platforms allow emotional narratives to circulate beyond individual networks, enabling wider audiences to encounter and interpret these experiences (Nesi, 2020). Through repeated discussion, certain themes such as academic pressure, economic uncertainty, and future insecurity gain prominence in youth discourse (Zeng, 2025). These themes illustrate how young people connect personal emotional states with structural challenges in contemporary society (Chhabra et al., 2025). From a social constructionist perspective, the repetition of such narratives contributes to the stabilization of particular meanings about youth wellbeing (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). As these meanings become widely shared, youth mental health is increasingly interpreted as reflecting broader social transformations rather than isolated individual problems (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). This interpretive shift demonstrates how communication processes influence the public recognition of social issues (Butt et al., 2025). By examining youth discourse through this lens, the analysis reveals how emotional experiences function as indicators of deeper societal dynamics. Consequently, youth mental health narratives provide valuable insight into the evolving relationship between generational experiences and structural change (Jing & He, 2025).

3.3 Digital Communication Environments and the Governance of Youth Mental Health

The increasing visibility of youth mental health discourse in digital communication environments raises important questions about how these narratives interact with governance processes. Social Construction of Reality theory emphasizes that public understanding of social problems is shaped through communicative interactions in which meanings are negotiated and stabilized (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Within contemporary digital ecosystems, social media platforms function as arenas where personal experiences of emotional distress are articulated and interpreted collectively (Butt et al., 2025). These communication processes not only shape peer-level interpretations but also influence broader societal awareness of youth wellbeing challenges (Jing & He, 2025). As youth narratives circulate widely through online discussions, they contribute to the formation of public perceptions regarding the psychological conditions faced by younger generations (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). Such perceptions can gradually influence institutional responses, including educational policies, health interventions, and public discourse on youth wellbeing (Chhabra et al., 2025). In this sense, digital communication environments operate as informal monitoring spaces where emerging social concerns become visible before they are formally recognized by institutions. The analytical focus therefore lies in examining how communication dynamics within digital platforms shape the governance landscape surrounding youth mental health. Understanding these dynamics helps explain how discourse produced within youth communities may influence broader institutional awareness and policy attention.

Existing literature indicates that digital communication environments increasingly serve as channels through which youth experiences become visible to wider social audiences (Nesi, 2020). Social media discussions about anxiety, academic pressure, and emotional vulnerability frequently circulate beyond peer networks and attract attention from educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Zeng, 2025). Through viral narratives, hashtags, and widely shared personal testimonies, individual experiences can evolve into publicly recognized concerns about generational wellbeing (Perlmutter et al., 2024). These communicative processes illustrate how online discourse contributes to shaping collective awareness of youth mental health issues (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). As emotional narratives gain

visibility, they may challenge traditional assumptions about the nature and scale of psychological distress among young populations (Weigle & Shafi, 2023). This increased visibility can encourage institutions to reconsider how youth wellbeing is interpreted within policy and governance frameworks (Chhabra et al., 2025). Digital communication environments therefore play a role in amplifying the social significance of youth emotional experiences. Rather than remaining confined to private discussions, mental health narratives become embedded within broader public conversations. This dynamic illustrates how communication processes can influence the recognition of social issues within governance contexts.

Another important dimension involves the way digital discourse shapes the interpretive frameworks used by institutions to understand youth mental health challenges. Policymakers and public institutions often rely on statistical indicators and clinical reports to evaluate mental health trends (Chhabra et al., 2025). However, digital communication platforms provide additional qualitative insights into how young people interpret their experiences and societal pressures (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Online narratives frequently reveal concerns that may not yet be captured through traditional institutional measurements (Jing & He, 2025). Discussions about academic competition, future employment insecurity, and social comparison illustrate how structural pressures are experienced by young populations (Zeng, 2025). These narratives provide valuable contextual information that complements conventional data sources used in policy analysis. From a social constructionist perspective, such discourse contributes to shaping how institutions interpret emerging social problems (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Communication environments therefore function as spaces where experiential knowledge about youth wellbeing becomes publicly articulated. The presence of these narratives within digital networks can gradually influence how institutions conceptualize youth mental health challenges. Consequently, governance responses may increasingly reflect the interpretive patterns emerging from public discourse.

Digital communication environments also enable new forms of interaction between youth communities and institutional actors concerned with mental health governance. Public institutions, advocacy organizations, and educational bodies often monitor social media discussions to better understand emerging concerns affecting younger populations (Nesi, 2020; Perlmutter et al., 2024). Through this monitoring process, digital discourse becomes an informal source of information about youth experiences and social pressures. The circulation of emotional narratives can therefore influence how institutions identify priority areas for intervention and support (Chhabra et al., 2025). For example, widespread online discussions about academic burnout or emotional exhaustion may prompt greater attention to educational pressures within policy debates (Jing & He, 2025). Similarly, narratives about social isolation or digital harassment may encourage institutional efforts to address online safety and wellbeing (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). These interactions demonstrate how communication environments can indirectly shape governance agendas related to youth mental health. Social Construction theory helps explain how repeated discourse patterns contribute to the stabilization of particular interpretations about social problems (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). As these interpretations become widely shared, they may influence institutional perspectives on youth wellbeing challenges. Communication therefore plays an important role in shaping the relationship between youth experiences and governance responses.

At the same time, the influence of digital communication on governance processes is not always straightforward. Online narratives may present diverse and sometimes

contradictory interpretations of youth emotional experiences (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Perlmutter et al., 2024). Some discussions emphasize structural pressures such as educational inequality or economic instability, while others focus on personal coping strategies and self-care practices (Khalaf et al., 2023; Zeng, 2025). These variations illustrate the plurality of meanings that emerge within digital communication environments. From a social constructionist viewpoint, this plurality reflects the dynamic nature of meaning-making processes in contemporary communication systems (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Institutions interpreting these narratives must therefore navigate multiple perspectives when considering policy responses. The complexity of online discourse can both enrich and complicate the governance process. On one hand, digital narratives provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of young people (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). On the other hand, the diversity of interpretations may make it difficult to translate discourse into coherent institutional strategies. Understanding these complexities is essential for interpreting how communication environments interact with governance structures.

The analysis suggests that digital communication environments are gradually transforming how youth mental health issues are recognized within governance contexts. Traditionally, institutional awareness of psychological challenges among young populations has relied heavily on clinical research and epidemiological surveys (Chhabra et al., 2025). While these approaches remain essential, digital discourse introduces an additional layer of socially generated information about youth wellbeing (Nesi, 2020). Online narratives reveal how structural pressures associated with modern societies are interpreted and experienced by young individuals (Jing & He, 2025; Zeng, 2025). Through the circulation of these narratives, youth mental health becomes increasingly visible as a public issue requiring collective attention. This visibility can encourage institutions to adopt more responsive approaches to youth wellbeing challenges (Chhabra et al., 2025). The presence of youth voices within digital communication spaces therefore contributes to shaping broader societal understanding of psychological health. In this sense, communication environments function as intermediaries connecting personal experiences with institutional awareness. The governance of youth mental health thus becomes partly influenced by communicative processes occurring within digital networks.

These findings extend previous discussions about the relationship between digital media and public governance by highlighting the interpretive role of communication environments in shaping policy awareness. Earlier research has often focused on the behavioural effects of social media on psychological wellbeing, emphasizing exposure to digital content as a potential risk factor (Keles et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2021). The present analysis instead emphasizes how discourse within digital platforms contributes to the social recognition of youth mental health concerns. By applying Social Construction of Reality theory, the findings demonstrate that governance responses are influenced not only by clinical evidence but also by communicative interpretations of social problems (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Youth narratives circulating through digital platforms therefore play a role in shaping how institutions perceive and prioritize wellbeing challenges affecting younger generations (Perlmutter et al., 2024). This perspective refines existing scholarship by illustrating how communication environments mediate the relationship between individual experiences and institutional responses. The analysis also contributes to filling the research gap identified earlier by integrating insights from communication studies into discussions of youth mental health governance. Through this integration, the study highlights how discourse within digital

communication networks becomes part of the broader process through which societies interpret and respond to emerging social challenges.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how youth mental health is constructed and interpreted through digital communication environments and how these discourses reflect broader societal transformations. The analysis showed that social media platforms function as important spaces where young people articulate emotional experiences related to stress, uncertainty, and identity formation. Through repeated interaction and narrative sharing, these experiences become part of collective interpretations about generational wellbeing. The findings also demonstrated that youth mental health discourse often connects personal emotional struggles with wider structural pressures such as educational competition, economic instability, and social expectations. As these narratives circulate within digital networks, they contribute to the public visibility of youth wellbeing challenges and shape broader societal awareness. In addition, the analysis highlighted that communication environments influence how institutions interpret emerging youth concerns. Youth mental health therefore operates not only as an individual psychological issue but also as a communicative indicator of social change expressed through digital discourse.

The study contributes to the development of interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate communication studies with youth mental health research. By applying Social Construction of Reality theory, the research demonstrates that mental health discourse should be understood as a process of meaning formation shaped by communication and interaction. This approach extends previous research that has primarily focused on behavioural or clinical dimensions of digital media use. The findings show that discourse within social media platforms plays an important role in shaping collective interpretations of psychological wellbeing. The study also contributes to conceptual discussions on youth mental health governance by highlighting the role of communication environments as informal spaces where social concerns become visible. Through this perspective, youth narratives circulating in digital networks are understood as communicative signals that may influence institutional awareness and policy discussions. The integration of communication theory with youth mental health analysis therefore offers a broader framework for understanding how social problems emerge and gain public recognition.

Future research can expand this line of inquiry by exploring more detailed forms of youth discourse within specific digital platforms and cultural contexts. Comparative studies across different regions or social groups may reveal how variations in communication environments influence the construction of youth mental health narratives. Further research may also investigate how institutional actors such as educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals interpret and respond to discourse emerging from youth communities. In addition, interdisciplinary approaches combining communication analysis with sociological and psychological perspectives may deepen understanding of the relationship between digital environments and emotional wellbeing. Researchers may also examine how evolving technologies such as algorithmic content distribution influence the visibility of mental health narratives in online spaces. These directions may contribute to more comprehensive interpretations of youth mental health as both a social and communicative phenomenon. Continued research in this area will help clarify how digital discourse shapes public understanding of youth wellbeing within rapidly changing social environments.

References

- Agyapong-Opoku, N., Agyapong-Opoku, F., & Greenshaw, A. (2025). Effects of Social Media Use on Youth and Adolescent Mental Health: A Scoping Review of Reviews. *Behavioral Sciences, 15*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15050574>
- Assarroudi, A., Nabavi, F. H., Armat, M., Ebadi, A., & Vaismoradi, M. (2018). Directed qualitative content analysis: the description and elaboration of its underpinning methods and data analysis process. *Journal of Research in Nursing, 23*, 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987117741667>
- Azungah, T. (2018). Qualitative research: deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/qrj-d-18-00035>
- Bingham, A. (2023). From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231183620>
- Butt, T. I., * N. I., Zahoor, M., & Saif, M. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on Teenage Mental Health. *Social Science Review Archives*. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.587>
- Cheong, H.-I., Lyons, A., Houghton, R., & Majumdar, A. (2023). Secondary Qualitative Research Methodology Using Online Data within the Context of Social Sciences. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231180160>
- Chhabra, J., Pilkington, V., Benakovic, R., Wilson, M., La Sala, L., & Seidler, Z. (2025). Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Scoping Review of Platform and Policy Recommendations. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 27*. <https://doi.org/10.2196/72061>
- Elbardan, H., & Kholeif, A. (2017). *An Interpretive Approach for Data Collection and Analysis*. 111–165. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54990-3_5
- Gephart, R., & Saylor, R. (2020). *Qualitative Designs and Methodologies for Business, Management, and Organizational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.230>
- Jing, L., & He, C. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health: Challenges and Opportunities. *Peta International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*. <https://doi.org/10.59088/pij.v4i1.75>
- Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2019). A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25*, 79–93.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851>
- Khalaf, A., Alubied, A., Khalaf, A., & Rifaey, A. (2023). The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review. *Cureus*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.42990>
- Kiger, M., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42, 846–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2020.1755030>
- Lewis, S. (2015). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. *Health Promotion Practice*, 16, 473–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839915580941>
- Morgan, H. (2022). Conducting a Qualitative Document Analysis. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5044>
- Nesi, J. (2020). The Impact of Social Media on Youth Mental Health. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 81, 116–121. <https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.81.2.116>
- Orben, A., Meier, A., Dalgleish, T., & Blakemore, S.-J. (2024). Mechanisms linking social media use to adolescent mental health vulnerability. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 3, 407–423. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-024-00307-y>
- Perlmutter, E., Dwyer, B., & Torous, J. (2024). Social Media and Youth Mental Health: Assessing the Impact Through Current and Novel Digital Phenotyping Methods. *Current Treatment Options in Psychiatry*, 11, 34–51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40501-024-00312-1>
- Popat, A., & Tarrant, C. (2022). Exploring adolescents' perspectives on social media and mental health and well-being – A qualitative literature review. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 28, 323–337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045221092884>
- Ruggiano, N., & Perry, T. (2017). Conducting secondary analysis of qualitative data: Should we, can we, and how? *Qualitative Social Work*, 18, 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325017700701>
- Valkenburg, P., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2021). Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 44, 58–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017>
- Weigle, P., & Shafi, R. (2023). Social Media and Youth Mental Health. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-023-01478-w>
- Zeng, X. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on Adolescents' Mental Health. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ht27388>