

# Navigating social media: Its impact on the online and offline well-being of social workers in private practice

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## Abstract

The study examined how social media impacts the online and offline well-being of social workers in private practice within the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. Employing an exploratory research design within a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The Uses and Gratifications Theory served as the study's theoretical framework, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results showed that social media is not one of the primary causes of anxiety and depression; however, it can worsen these conditions among individuals who already experience them. Findings regarding the tools and techniques used by private practice social workers to support their well-being revealed that social media offers several benefits, including attracting new clients, strengthening relationships with existing clients, and providing psychosocial support to individuals in need. The findings further revealed that social media affects social workers' ability to manage their well-being both online and offline, as creating content for social media marketing requires considerable creativity and time. The study implies that a secure, accessible, and affordable platform should be developed specifically for social work private practitioners to enable them to practice safely while limiting exposure to potential risks such as hacking and scamming.

**Keywords:** *mental health, digital wellness, social media engagement, psychosocial well-being, social networking platforms, technology and well-being*

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## 1. Introduction

Globalization, neoliberalism, and the rapid advancement of technology have contributed to the emergence of social media and internet-based communication tools, resulting in a networked society (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Understanding these relationships enables practitioners to recognize their potential for misuse and abuse. For example, communication between social workers and service users has been transformed by the widespread use of social networking sites, social media platforms, and other online technologies. Social media provides benefits to businesses, communities, organizations, groups, and individuals alike (Hinchcliffe & Kim, 2012). It facilitates the establishment of small businesses, access to current events and research, and the formation and maintenance of friendships (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). In addition, social media enables adopted and foster children to communicate with their biological parents (Colaner & Scharp, 2016).

The Social Work without Borders (SWwB) network is one example of how communication has made a worldwide audience instantly accessible (IASSW, 2015). Information technologies enable emergency services, including ambulances, fire departments, police, and health agencies, to swiftly and widely disseminate alerts (Alexander, 2014). Furthermore, studies show that young men who discuss their worries with their peers online are more likely to have better mental health than those who do not (Ellis et al., 2013). Political engagement and democratic participation can be facilitated by social media (Bertot et al., 2012), which also fosters open discourse and collaborative reflections (Friesen & Lowe, 2012). In addition, social media can be used to organise successful political actions (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015), strengthen relationships (Arikewuyo et al., 2021), and promote inclusivity (Nyabuto, 2023).

However, social media use is a “double-edged sword” for private practice social workers, as it can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on their personal and professional well-being (Ventola, 2014). While social media empowers individuals, it also enables predators, trolls, stalkers, and paedophiles to gain access to potential victims (Kim et al., 2010). Online bullying of children and youth has also raised significant concerns regarding child protection (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Posts that spread rapidly online have the potential to cause irreversible harm to recipients (Fu et al., 2013). Following failed political revolutions, some governments strengthened their control over social media platforms (Shirkey, 2011). During times of calamity, social media may also spread misinformation and

facilitate terrorist activities (Alexander, 2014). Consequently, online communications and citizen surveillance have expanded because of the misuse of these communication tools (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). In 2013, Edward Snowden exposed extensive surveillance of private communications conducted by the United States and Britain (BBC, 2014). For social workers, the challenge lies in utilizing the advantages and opportunities provided by social media without causing harm to others while critically examining how these platforms can be integrated into daily practice. Although online practices raise numerous ethical concerns related to boundary crossing, dual relationships, and confidentiality, it remains unclear how these challenges should be addressed (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017).

Globally, the emergence of a mediated social environment has enabled different cultures to connect more easily. In South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape, geographical limitations no longer restrict interaction (Hendriks & Kanjiri, 2021; Matema & Kariuki, 2022). Social media significantly influences the online and offline well-being of private social workers. While it offers opportunities for professional development and connection, it also presents challenges associated with burnout, boundary issues, and vicarious trauma. Research indicates a mixed impact on social workers' overall well-being, with 64% believing that social media benefits their practice and 58% believing that it hinders it (Grammenos & Warner, 2022).

This study examines how social media affects the online and offline well-being of social workers in private practice in the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Specifically, the study investigates the effects of social media on the well-being of private practice social workers, identifies the strategies and tools they use to promote their well-being on social media, and explores how they manage their well-being both online and offline. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory and relevant literature, this study seeks to understand how social media influences the well-being of social workers in private practice in both online and offline contexts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. The Effects of Social Media on Social Workers' Well-Being***

Research on the use of social media and other internet-based resources in social work practice is still in its infancy. These technologies have entered the profession and transformed how professionals communicate with clients and with one another. Social workers use online

therapy, text messaging, email, video conferencing, and social networking sites to interact with clients and colleagues (Reamer, 2013). This shift in practice has raised several ethical concerns. Among the issues identified are confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, conflicts of interest, dual relationships, boundary crossing, service termination, and research evidence (Reamer, 2015). Although professionals are aware of the ethical dilemmas associated with online platforms, many remain uncertain about how to address them. Furthermore, many students are unaware of ethical dilemmas and the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and conduct in online environments.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) established guidelines for technology use in the United States 25 years ago (Skliar, 2021). These guidelines focused on technical and cultural competence, privacy and confidentiality, as well as risk management and documentation. The Model Law for Web Practice, which regulates electronic social work services and requires practitioners to comply with relevant standards, particularly those concerning client confidentiality, has further reinforced the importance of professional conduct (Pascoe, 2023). However, these guidelines have not been substantially revised despite ongoing advancements in internet communication technologies. Professional bodies have since developed online ethics guidelines for social media use among social workers (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). According to the most recent practice standards published by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), social workers must remain aware of ethical considerations when using social media and online communication platforms (AASW, 2016, 2023).

As the use of communication technology continues to expand across various aspects of social work practice, social workers must remain aware of the potential challenges related to confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries, professional competence, record-keeping, and other ethical concerns. Regardless of whether interactions, relationships, and communications occur face-to-face or through technology, the ethical principles outlined in the Code of Ethics remain generally applicable. This regulation defines “technology-assisted social work services” as any social work service delivered through computers, landlines, mobile phones, tablets, video technology, or other electronic and digital technologies (Association of Social Work Boards, 2018). The digital and electronic platforms used in this process include text messaging, email, chat rooms, the Internet, online social media platforms, and newly developed digital applications. Technology-assisted social services encompass

psychotherapy, individual, family, or group counselling, community organization, advocacy, mediation, education, supervision, research, evaluation, and other social work services (Segal et al., 2025). Social workers should therefore understand how ethical standards apply to emerging technological developments that may be integrated into their professional practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

One significant concern that must be addressed is that practice standards continue to lag far behind the rapid growth of online social media (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). To date, ethical dilemmas arising in virtual practice settings have largely been governed by pre-existing and, in some cases, outdated codes of ethics. The South African Council for Social Service Professions places strong emphasis on professionalism, ethics, and respect in social media use (SACSSP, 2025). The organization cautions that social media posts may be perceived as public “billboards” and advises individuals to consider how such posts may affect both their personal and professional lives (SACSSP, 2017).

## ***2.2. Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical foundation of this investigation is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). According to Drew (2023), the UGT is a sociology of mass communication theory that examines how social media users establish goals and make decisions when using media products. In social psychology, the theory is often examined through a positivist approach. This theory argues that individuals prefer specific forms of media because they expect satisfaction from their choices (Lai, 2023). Furthermore, UGT seeks to examine how media influences public perception, culture, processes, and user behaviour (Drew, 2023).

The UGT differs from other theories used to study social media phenomena because it is particularly relevant to digital media, which has become embedded in everyday life and requires active audience participation to satisfy a variety of needs. UGT forms part of social media research that seeks to understand how specific communication technologies satisfy individuals’ social and psychological needs (Hajdarmataj & Paksoy, 2023). Communication is one of the most essential skills required of social workers, as it is used to foster positive relationships and understand the issues clients present (Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023). According to the UGT, individuals deliberately choose media content to satisfy their personal needs and desires. The theory further posits that users select one medium over another to meet various needs (Whiting & Williams, 2013). UGT provides a nomological research framework

that does not rely on a predetermined set of constructs (Li et al., 2025). The theory has been widely applied to both traditional and online media, including instant messaging (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), television (Hsu & Lin, 2023), email (Rauniar et al., 2013), mobile phones (Ling et al., 2006), and newspapers (Lesitaokana & Akpabio, 2014). An increasing number of media-related studies have also applied UGT to analyse user behaviour within social media contexts (Wibowo, 2022).

According to Drew (2023), individuals use media for several purposes, including entertainment, social interaction, emotional release, and education. For entertainment, people use media to escape from their daily routines and activities. Social media also provides opportunities for individuals to connect with others around the world, communicate, and engage in social interaction through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. In terms of emotional release, media can provide emotional relief, as users may improve their mood by watching movies or listening to music. Media also serves an educational purpose by facilitating the dissemination of knowledge through documentaries, online books, and online learning platforms.

In today's globalized society, UGT remains essential for understanding media consumption patterns. This supports the findings regarding social workers' experiences with social media and its effects on their well-being. The study considered this theory appropriate for analysing the research problem. Consequently, this theoretical framework guides the investigation into how private practice social workers use social media, as well as the resources and strategies they employ to ensure that their well-being is maintained.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

A research design provides a framework for collecting and analysing data (Tobi & Kampen, 2018). This study employed an exploratory research design within a qualitative approach. An exploratory qualitative research design is essential for investigating new or insufficiently understood topics, as it helps identify patterns, key variables, and the "hows" and "whys" of a phenomenon while generating in-depth insights, developing hypotheses, and laying the foundation for future research (Dai & Hardy, 2023). Since the influence of social media on this professional group remains an emerging area with limited in-depth, foundational, and comprehensive research, this approach was considered appropriate for examining how

social media affects the online and offline well-being of social workers in private practice in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

### ***3.2. Participants of the Study***

The research population consisted of social work professionals in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Eastern Cape, South Africa, who use social media in both their online and offline private practice. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to demonstrate interest in the study, possess both private and professional social media accounts, be registered as professionals with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, have at least five years of experience in private practice, and reside within the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality.

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 social workers who met the specified eligibility criteria. In qualitative research, purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique commonly used to intentionally select participants, cases, or data sources that possess characteristics, experiences, or expertise relevant to the research topic (Tajik et al., 2025). In addition, some participants who met the eligibility criteria were recruited through the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which existing participants recommend other potential participants from their social networks, allowing the sample to expand progressively, much like a snowball (Naderifar et al., 2017).

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering***

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to collect data from 15 social workers who use social media in their private online and offline practice. According to Ruslin et al. (2022), semi-structured interviews facilitate the collection of rich and detailed descriptions for an in-depth exploration of the research topic from a smaller sample, as participants actively engage in and help direct the discussion.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

The qualitative data collected in this study were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyse, and present themes or patterns of meaning within data (Christou, 2022). The process of developing the report

involves familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing those themes, and finally defining and naming them (Naeem et al., 2023). This flexible and accessible approach enables researchers to gain deep insights and understand complex issues by systematically organising and analysing data to reveal significant relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic approach to thematic analysis, which consists of six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

### ***3.5. Research Ethics***

Before the interviews commenced, each participant was provided with a consent form to read and sign. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and indicate their willingness to participate, while the researchers ensured that they fully understood the contents of the consent form. Signed consent forms were obtained prior to conducting the interviews.

The researchers also checked the sound quality of the recording equipment and ensured that the interview setting was suitable and comfortable for the interviewees. Permission to record the interviews using a mobile device was obtained from the participants, and the recording equipment was confirmed to be appropriate for use. After the interviews, the audio recordings were uploaded to the university server and secured using a password to ensure data protection and confidentiality.

## **4. Findings**

Following the data collection and analysis process, the findings were organised into themes and sub-themes. The process of data collection and analysis led to the emergence of three main themes and their corresponding sub-themes. These themes were subsequently discussed and contextualised within the existing body of literature.

### ***4.1. Mental Health***

Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which enables individuals to cope with stress, function effectively at work, and contribute to their communities (World Health Organization, 2025). Mental well-being is a broader concept that includes positive aspects of mental health, such as resilience, life satisfaction, and a sense of

purpose. Since mental health conditions can influence an individual's mood, thoughts, and behaviour, maintaining a healthy balance is essential. Although social media is widely used around the world for communication, information sharing, and entertainment, certain negative aspects of its use have been associated with mental health concerns (Naslund et al., 2020).

**Depression.** Depression is a serious mood disorder that affects an individual's thoughts, feelings, and daily activities, such as eating, sleeping, and working (World Health Organization, 2025). It is often caused by genetic, environmental, or biological factors and can be treated through therapy, medication, lifestyle changes, or a combination of these approaches; however, proper diagnosis and treatment require professional assistance.

In South Africa, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) is a mental health support organization that provides free telephonic counselling, resources, and referrals. SADAG has collaborated with parents, teachers, and students in educational institutions to help reduce the suicide rate in South Africa (Taljaard, 2013). The following quotations from two semi-structured interviews reflect participants' individual perspectives on the relationship between social media, anxiety, and depression. According to one participant:

*"I don't think it will cause depression or anxiety, and I doubt it's the root cause. I do believe it can exacerbate it. So, if someone already struggles with things, experiences anxiety, is unsure of themselves, unsure of where they want to be or their purpose, it can escalate that"* (P. 5)

In a contrary view, another participant stated that:

*"Yes, I'll say because, sometimes you're on social media and you will, you will, you would like to compare yourself with where you're at"* (P. 2)

The findings from Participant 2 indicate that spending time on social media may increase individuals' susceptibility to comparing themselves with others. According to Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their identities and abilities with those of others. Adolescents with low self-esteem are particularly likely to engage in social comparison on social media (Burnell et al., 2024), which may lead to negative emotions and eventually contribute to depression. On the other hand, the data from Participant 5 further suggest a relationship between depression and social media comparison. Supporting this perspective, the participant explained that individuals frequently compare themselves with others on social media platforms. Such comparisons may evoke negative emotions, which can

ultimately contribute to depressive feelings. To further support this view, another participant stated that:

*“Okay, so. One of the things can be, you know, the constant availability, as the information around mental illness can be. It almost makes you want to diagnose yourself. And then you end up being anxious and depressed because now you have diagnosed yourself based on the information, you know, the large amount of information that is out there. Um, on the internet” (P. 2)*

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, information and education are among the gratifications that users derive from media use (McQuail, 2010). The findings from Participant 3 revealed that social media serves as a source of information and knowledge regarding mental illness.

**Anxiety.** Anxiety disorders are classified as mental illnesses characterized by excessive, uncontrollable, and persistent fear and worry, particularly when these feelings are disproportionate to actual situations and interfere with daily functioning. Anxiety affects individuals in different ways and may vary in duration and intensity. One participant affirmed this perspective and supported the notion that anxiety plays a significant role in social media use:

*“When I use social media too much it definitely increases my anxiety because I feel like there’s just too much knowledge or flood of information coming in at a rapid pace, so because its coming in at a rapid pace my brain is not even able to comprehend it all at once, so it definitely increases the level of anxiety” (P. 4)*

#### **4.2. Social Media Use**

Social media platforms are used by individuals for a wide range of purposes, such as communication, business, and marketing. As of late 2025, there were more than 5.6 billion social media users worldwide, representing nearly 70% of the global population, using platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok to connect, share information, and consume content for an average of two hours and twenty minutes daily (Slotta, 2025a).

In South Africa, social media usage continues to grow significantly. As of early 2025, the country had over 26 million active social media users, representing approximately 41.5% of the population (Slotta, 2025b). Users spend a considerable amount of time on these platforms, averaging approximately 3.4 hours daily, with WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok

ranking among the most widely used platforms. However, current trends indicate shifts in user behaviour as individuals increasingly seek more relevant and personalized content. At the same time, brands are placing greater emphasis on platforms such as LinkedIn and YouTube, while public awareness regarding privacy concerns and legal implications continues to grow. Within private practice, social workers use social media to advance their professional development through peer networking, resource sharing, and staying informed about current issues in the profession. The following paragraphs illustrate the various motivations underlying participants' use of social media.

**Digital marketing tool.** Digital marketing refers to the use of social media and web-based platforms to promote businesses, products, or services to consumers (Khanom, 2023). Various strategies, including search engines, email marketing, and social media platforms, are used to market brands and engage target audiences. Through social media, many businesses are now able to promote and offer their products and services directly to consumers online. One of the participants supported this view and suggested that:

*“Positives would be especially in my work marketing, it has opened many doors for marketing, then also the platforms were used to connect with clients and help clients reflect and just provide positivity and assistance daily, because on the platform you can go off daily, and clients receive positivity through those platforms” (P. 13)*

According to Cultivation Theory, prolonged exposure to media can gradually influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of reality over time (Shrum, 2017). This theory was originally developed as part of a broader cultural indicators study that examined the general issue of how media shapes culture through its storytelling function (Shrum, 2017). As a sociocultural theory, there is a close relationship among three components: message creation, the effects of messages on audiences, and the cultivation processes within media institutions (Shrum, 2017). However, much media research has focused specifically on the third component, namely cultivation analysis. One participant expressed the view that:

*“Such a distortion of reality, and I think that's why we do see so much mental illness and amongst youngsters, and it's so unnatural to just spend hours on your phone and not interact with people you know” (P. 1)*

According to the study, many young people today spend a considerable amount of time on social media, becoming deeply immersed in the virtual world and withdrawing from direct

social interaction with others. Excessive social media use has been associated with social isolation (Whaite et al., 2018), as well as increased levels of anxiety and depression (Dhir et al., 2018).

***Socialization tools.*** Socialization is the process through which individuals interact, learn, and develop their values, social skills, and behaviours (Yusuvaliyeva, 2024). It can be classified into five categories: primary, secondary, developmental, anticipatory, and resocialization (Darmon, 2023). Primary socialization occurs when children are taught the values, traditions, and behaviours expected within a particular culture. Secondary socialization refers to the process through which individuals learn appropriate behaviours within smaller groups while remaining part of a larger society. Changes in values, attitudes, and beliefs associated with participation in society are generally considered less significant than those acquired during primary socialization. Developmental socialization focuses on enhancing an individual's social skills through learning processes. Anticipatory socialization refers to the process through which individuals prepare themselves for future social roles and interactions, while resocialization involves abandoning previous behavioural patterns and adopting new ones as individuals transition from one stage or aspect of life to another. Resocialization is believed to occur throughout all stages of life.

In social work practice, the application of these forms of socialization, aligned with professional ethics and principles, influences the behaviour of both clients and social workers (Hantman et al., 2006). As stated by one participant:

*“It’s also useful where people in private practice can meet and build with one another, because private practice can be a lonely place, because we are in this place all by ourselves, so just connecting with other people in private practice, it is so important and a helpful tool on social media” (P. 15)*

The findings revealed that participants use social media for a variety of purposes, including socialization, accessing information, and observing or monitoring others. The findings from Participant 15 support the Uses and Gratifications Theory by demonstrating that socialization is one of the primary reasons individuals engage with social media platforms.

***Communication tools.*** Communication is the process of transmitting information through a channel from a sender (source) to a receiver (recipient). Upon receiving the message, the recipient decodes, interprets, and provides feedback. Communication tools refer to the

devices and platforms that facilitate the transmission of information and sustain interaction between the sender and the recipient (Fatimayin, 2018). These tools include video conferencing, teleconferencing, email, and messaging applications (Adamska, 2020). As stated by one participant:

*“It's more accessible, especially for the younger folk who feel overwhelmed by their feelings. Overwhelmed with their feelings, they don't know what's going on. And you know, we can just jump on the phone and start communicating with that counsellor, you know?” (P. 8)*

The study found that social media provides online therapeutic services to a wide range of users, particularly young people. Communication, whether related to business, personal matters, or global issues, is one of the primary reasons individuals use social media platforms (Dixon, 2012). According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, users may derive various forms of gratification from media use, such as escapism, information seeking, emotional release, and surveillance (Drew, 2023). The findings further revealed that clients of the participants use social media as a platform to express their emotions and experience emotional relief. Although social media has become a valuable tool for maintaining communication with clients and strengthening business connections, it also raises concerns related to security and safety, such as the risk of hacking and unauthorized access. One participant suggested that:

*“Okay, one, I would say, the negative of Google is that anyone can put a review there, and whether it's true or not, you cannot take it down. They should at least have an option of reporting into it and exploring and proving evidence to it, so that reviews can be taken down, and then scammers, hackers, because my Facebook business account was hacked. So that was a very bad thing, because people can get access through whoever is following your page, and then they would try to scam my clients into getting discounts if they paid that day. Ahh, it was a whole bit of nonsense, so the safety side of social media is a bit worrying” (P. 12)*

#### **4.3. Limitations of Social Media**

Grey (2025) asserts that although social media can be used as a marketing strategy to attract clients, businesses may also face negative consequences, such as reputational damage and privacy breaches. Social workers in private practice operate their own businesses, and the

participants supported the literature by sharing their personal experiences and perspectives regarding the advantages and disadvantages of social media within their profession.

Social media can benefit social workers by enhancing communication, supporting community development, and promoting professional services and opportunities (Grammenos & Warner, 2022). It enables practitioners to reach wider audiences, promote resources, establish professional networks, and remain informed about current issues and best practices. However, the use of social media in social work practice also presents several challenges, such as risks to client confidentiality and privacy, blurred professional boundaries, and potential harm to the social worker's professional reputation (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Furthermore, social media may contribute to disciplinary or legal consequences, client isolation, and the spread of misinformation (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Although the participants acknowledged that social media is a valuable tool for communication and advertising, they also reported experiencing challenges on these platforms, such as negative reviews and hacking incidents, which they perceived as potentially harmful to their businesses.

**Brand reputation.** Numerous organizations have recognized that social media presents both advantages and disadvantages. One significant disadvantage for businesses is that individuals can post negative comments publicly without prior review, which may damage an organization's reputation (Odediran, 2020). A participant reinforced the influence of social media on brand reputation by emphasizing the impact of communication tools and stating that:

*“Okay, one, I would say, the negative of Google is that anyone can put a review there, and whether it's true or not, you cannot take it down. They should at least have an option of reporting into it and exploring and proving evidence it so that reviews can be taken down and then scammers, hackers, because my Facebook's business account was hacked” (P. 13)*

**Time-consuming.** Many individuals, particularly young people, spend a considerable amount of time on social media platforms today (Dar & Nagrath, 2022). Corporate life can be highly demanding and time-consuming, especially in relation to content creation and brand promotion (Jefferson & Tanton, 2015). One participant further reiterated that:

*” Some of the other negatives are that it can steal your time, lost in the world of socials, you know, instead of being in the present time in the real-world age and what you're doing right now, and it can be a huge time waster” (P. 6).*

## 5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how social media affects the online and offline well-being of private practice social workers. Communication between social workers and service users has evolved significantly as many professionals now interact and collaborate with clients through social media platforms, social networking sites, and other online technologies (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Throughout this process, social workers must remain committed to ethical principles and reflective professional practice (Edwards & Parkinson, 2024).

Best et al. (2014) found that men's mental health may benefit from the ability to express emotions through online platforms. Consequently, social workers must recognize this generational shift in help-seeking behaviour in order to provide effective interpersonal support through social media. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has also been shown to significantly improve social workers' well-being (Khanchel-Lakhoua & Kadri, 2024). ICT was found to enhance job resources, which contributed to greater work engagement, reduced job demands, and lower levels of burnout among social workers. In contrast, a Finnish study reported that social workers' interactions on social media were often limited and inadequate (Sarker, 2015). Factors contributing to these challenges included fear, negative media comments, exposure to inappropriate or erotic content, privacy concerns, and limited knowledge regarding effective social media use (Sarker, 2015). Nevertheless, increased engagement on social media platforms may strengthen social professionals' reputations, thereby improving both client well-being and the effectiveness of social work practice (Sarker, 2015). To achieve this, professional standards for social media use are essential.

Social media remains an important aspect of modern life and has developed into a valuable tool for communication and interaction. The concept of "social media" continues to evolve and encompasses a broad range of internet-based tools that enable individuals and groups to communicate, share ideas, exchange information, send private messages, share images and other content, and, in some cases, collaborate in real time (Peck, 2014; Chauhan et al., 2012; Lambert et al., 2012). Terms such as "Web 2.0" and "social networking" are also commonly associated with social media (Lambert et al., 2012). Mental health professionals, including clinical social workers, may use social media to network with colleagues, share professional resources, and promote their services. To facilitate effective and professional communication, the National Association of Social Workers advises clinical social workers to

understand and apply appropriate online etiquette, while recognizing the growing influence of social media within the profession (Ventola, 2014).

Despite its potential benefits, social media also presents various personal and professional challenges, including ethical dilemmas and boundary-related concerns. These issues can affect social workers' well-being both in their personal lives and in private practice. The "always-on" culture associated with social media may contribute to stress and exhaustion by making it difficult to separate work responsibilities from personal life (Jones, 2018). Although social media can create opportunities for professional growth and client engagement, it may also pose risks related to confidentiality, privacy, and dual relationships with clients (Jones, 2018).

Technology use among social workers continues to increase. Advances in technology have transformed social work practice and enhanced professionals' ability to support individuals in need. Modern social workers may provide a variety of services, such as online counselling, telephone counselling, videoconferencing, self-guided web-based interventions, electronic social networking, mobile applications, automated learning modules, email communication, and text messaging (Schott & Weiss, 2016). These technological developments have fundamentally reshaped the social worker–client relationship by creating new forms of interaction and communication (Pazer, 2024).

To maintain balance and well-being, private practice social workers prioritize self-care, establish clear professional boundaries, and use technology responsibly in both online and offline environments (Jian et al., 2025). This includes maintaining a healthy work–life balance, integrating self-care practices into daily routines, ensuring the security of online activities, and seeking support from colleagues to prevent burnout (Compson, 2015). Social workers can further support their well-being on social media by developing professional social media strategies, limiting personal use, and addressing challenging situations through professional consultation and peer support rather than public forums (Gevertz & Greenwood, 2009). In addition, they may utilize professional online networks, such as those provided by the National Association of Social Workers, for support and the exchange of professional information (Reamer, 2018).

## 6. Conclusion

The process of data collection and analysis led to several important conclusions. The first theme that emerged from the study concerned whether participants' use of social media contributed to anxiety or depression. Most participants argued that social media is not necessarily a primary cause of anxiety and depression; however, it may exacerbate the symptoms experienced by individuals who already struggle with these conditions.

The second theme focused on how private practice social workers use social media as a tool for marketing their services and gathering information about clients and employees relevant to their professional practice. Based on the participants' accounts, the study deduced that social media offers several advantages and can be effectively used to attract new clients, strengthen professional relationships, and provide services to individuals in need of psychosocial support.

The third theme reflected the limitations and challenges participants experienced while using social media. One major limitation identified was that social media can be highly time-consuming. Participants further noted that creating content for marketing purposes requires substantial time, effort, and creativity. Another sub-theme that emerged was brand reputation. Although participants acknowledged that social media is an effective platform for marketing and communication, they also reported that it may negatively affect business reputation through issues such as negative reviews and hacking incidents.

Drawing from the experiences shared by private practice social workers, the study argued that social media can serve as a valuable platform for meeting social and psychological needs and gratifications. In terms of practical implications, the study recommends the development of a secure, regulated, accessible, and affordable platform specifically designed for private social work practitioners. Such a platform could enable social workers to practice more safely while reducing exposure to risks such as hacking, scams, and other online threats.

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### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of Fort Hare, Alice Campus. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearance(s) by the University of Fort Hare, Alice Campus, granting clearance or approval for the conduct of the data gathering involving human subjects.

### **AI Declaration**

The authors declare the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot in paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility for ensuring proper review and editing of content generated using AI.

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