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EXPLORING DIGITAL SELF-EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EXPERT INSIGHTS

Abstract. Generation Z, marked by new media, interconnectedness, and a culture of instant gratification, allocates much of its time to social media platforms. Beyond their multifaceted functions, these platforms have the potential to facilitate learning by enabling teenagers to engage in various stages of knowledge construction, such as sharing ideas, identifying discrepancies, synthesizing information, and applying knowledge. This study investigates the role of Instagram and TikTok as knowledge sources for Generation Z by analyzing both the contributions and concerns related to the consumption of educational content. To achieve this, we conducted expert interviews (N=13) with academicians and practitioners from Romania, Germany, and the USA. The results indicate that social media can facilitate social interactions and identity formation among adolescents while also serving as a source of information and knowledge. However, adolescents should be guided in navigating the potential threats and mitigating their harmful effects. Additionally, the gathered expertise contributed to developing a guideline for practitioners, focusing on the key elements for creating educational content for teenagers.

Keywords: social media, adolescents, informal education, educational content

1. Introduction

The advent of Web 2.0 and social media (SM) has revolutionized how Generation Z approaches learning, ushering in a paradigm shift from

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traditional, formal education to self-directed and informal learning (Cilliers, 2017; Scholz & Vyugina, 2019). Unlike traditional media, which historically served as a primary source of information, the internet and social networks have evolved into vast and dynamic knowledge hubs (Goldie, 2016). SM, described by Shankleman et al. (2021) as a window to the world, provides a constantly evolving platform that resonates with younger generations, introducing new dimensions of learning and engagement (Throuvala et al., 2019). Thus, more research is needed to shed light on the informational reach of SM by analyzing it as an important educational resource for adolescents.

Given the growing importance of SM in adolescents' lives, the implications of the paper rely on understanding how they interact with these platforms and how it impacts their social and personal development, and overall well-being. Moreover, to effectively engage teenagers with this type of content, practitioners must have a clear image of the characteristics that define successful content. Therefore, this study addresses one primary research question: Can Instagram and TikTok serve as effective platforms to provide informal education for adolescents? This research question is supported by two secondary questions: What are the contributions and concerns of consuming educational content on SM? What key elements define impactful educational content tailored for adolescent audiences on SM? In order to answer these questions and to gain deeper insights into the topic, 13 exploratory semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with academics and practitioners from Germany, Romania, and the USA.

Technology can empower learners by providing increased agency, chances to participate in networked communities, and access to diverse resources to assist knowledge creation. (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). The Internet is a significant "source of expanding horizons" (Szymkowiak et al., 2021, p. 2), providing rapid and widespread access to information technologies across diverse domains. A growing number of recent studies have explored the use of SM from a pedagogical perspective of formal learning (e.g., Barrot, 2018; Greenhow et al., 2019; Alamri et al., 2020; Chugh et al., 2020; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Valtonen et al., 2021). However, the literature regarding SM as a platform for informal learning reveals a research gap, as it is limited in exploring how it

connects formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Barrot, 2020; Manca, 2020).

Previous studies on Romanian teenagers have concentrated on the impact of SM on users' mental health, self-presentation on social platforms (Ștefăniță et al., 2018; Vițelar, 2019; Szambolics et al., 2023;), online privacy (Balaban et al., 2024), media literacy and fake news (Corbu et al., 2021; Rotaru, 2023), or the effects of advertising on teenagers (Iancu, 2016; Balaban et al., 2022), however, their significance as platforms for informal learning remains largely unexamined. SM conveys values, attitudes, and information on various topics that interest and engage young people. Exploring their motivations for using SM is increasingly important, as these platforms constitute a significant part of their daily lives and, therefore, substantially impact their development, growth, and understanding of the world.

The novelty of this research is threefold. Firstly, while existing research has addressed various benefits and risks associated with adolescents' use of social media (Wang et al., 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019; Engeln, 2020; Shankleman et al., 2021), fewer studies have examined its potential for informal educational purposes. Secondly, the perspectives of experts and practitioners in the field remain underrepresented in the current literature. Thirdly, this study addresses these gaps by exploring expert insights and outlining practical recommendations for creating effective educational content targeted at young audiences.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social media as informal learning environments

In addition to family, school, religion, cultural institutions, and social organizations, the media are among the most significant influences on education (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Denojean-Mairet et al., 2024). The emergence of SM platforms, collaborative tools, and user-generated content has created new opportunities for interaction and knowledge exchange (Bush & Löns, 2024). SM, based on the technical and ideological foundations of Web 2.0, enables users to create, share, and interact opportunistically and selectively through digital channels, either in real-

time or asynchronously (Zhang et al., 2024). Through the widespread use of smartphones, it has gained immense popularity, especially among adolescents and young adults who use it as an integral part of their daily lives (Griffiths & Kuss, 2017; Hosen et al., 2021; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022).

Its development has transformed from purely social communication hubs to multifunctional entities (Hosen et al., 2021; Denojean-Mairet et al., 2024). These web-based technologies, with their interactive and innovative features, are tailored to the digital generation and enable virtual communication as well as personal development, often without prior expertise (Hosen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Ansari and Khan (2020) emphasize that communication and networking among young people are fundamentally transformed, turning the virtual world into an easily accessible, vast repository of knowledge.

SM encompasses a diverse range of online information sources that are created, shared, and utilized by consumers to inform one another (Hu & Noor, 2024). They enable individuals to publish and retrieve information, collaborate on projects, and maintain relationships (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). As a result, SM has become the subject of research on numerous topics, including its influence on politics, social interactions, activism, identity formation, and youth cultures (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022). Furthermore, SM has established itself as a significant platform for news dissemination, political participation, and democratic discussions (Newman et al., 2020; Masullo et al., 2022).

In January 2024, according to DataReportal, there were 13.30 million active SM user identities in Romania, representing 67.4% of the population (this figure may not represent unique individuals) (Kemp, 2024). In a 2021 survey of 894 Romanian adolescents, the Center for Independent Journalism found Instagram as the top platform, which was mentioned 719 times, followed by YouTube and TikTok. This underscores the popularity of video content among this group, with WhatsApp, Snapchat, Spotify, and Discord also showing notable engagement (CJI, 2023). Instagram and TikTok share the characteristic of focusing on short video formats, reflected in Instagram Reels and TikTok videos, and are, therefore, very popular among teenagers.

2.2. Instagram

Instagram, launched in 2010 as a mobile platform for sharing photos and videos, quickly gained popularity for its innovative editing features and visually oriented, *image-first* approach (Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Rejeb et al., 2022). Through continuous adaptability and innovation, Instagram introduced features such as live broadcasts, stories, and cross-platform sharing, significantly increasing its appeal to younger audiences (Kircaburun et al., 2018). The ability to capture, edit, and upload photos directly within the app, alongside the use of filters for creative adjustments to color, resolution, and tone, has made the platform a preferred choice, allowing adolescents to shape their online identity while engaging in a visually oriented social experience (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Kircaburun et al., 2018; Bush & Löns, 2024). In addition to creative content sharing, Instagram provides a rich environment for self-expression, social interaction, and documentation (Szambolics et al., 2023; Avci et al., 2025).

Instagram continues to experience growth worldwide, reaching a user base of 2 billion in 2024, making it the third most used SM platform (Statista, 2024). The platform is particularly popular among young adults: globally, 32% of Instagram users belong to the 18-24 age group (Statista, 2024). A similar trend is observed in Romania, where Instagram had approximately 5.78 million users in July 2024. The largest user group, 32.1%, consists of 18-24-year-olds (Statista, 2024). Adolescents and young adults dominate the platform, as evidenced by the 1.86 million users from the 18-24 age group in Romania (Statista, 2024).

2.3. TikTok

TikTok has gained unprecedented global popularity, particularly among young audiences. Launched initially as Musical.ly in 2014, TikTok was acquired by ByteDance in 2016, rebranded, and launched globally as Douyin in China and TikTok elsewhere (Dias & Duarte, 2022; Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023). TikTok's short, music-enhanced videos, typically ranging from 3 to 60 seconds, provide a platform for young users to explore self-expression and identity (Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023). Its diverse content

covers topics from education and health to technology and lifestyle, while interactive features like dance challenges, sketches, and musical performances promote creativity (Dias & Duarte, 2022). Additionally, TikTok's creative tools, such as filters and speed adjustments, enable users to craft personalized content, contributing to its dynamic and engaging environment (Bresnick, 2019). Originally designed for this target group, the platform strengthens Generation Z's sense of community through trends, symbols, and values typical of their culture (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

TikTok has emerged as a cultural phenomenon that reflects the media consumption habits of Gen Z by offering dynamic tools such as the personalized *For You Page* delivering personalized content, and keeping users engaged (Zeng et al., 2021). Moreover, it offers diverse opportunities for education and information, as professionals from various fields share expert knowledge through informative videos (Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023). TikTok has become one of the most downloaded apps, with over 2.6 billion downloads and approx – 1 billion active users worldwide (Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023). In Romania, TikTok has surpassed Instagram, having 8.97 million users (Kemp, 2024), with 64.6% of the users aged between 18-24 years (Start.io, 2024).

Despite their popularity, TikTok, Instagram, and similar short-video apps remain under-researched in academic studies, leaving gaps in understanding the impact of this format on media consumption and social interaction (Klug, 2020). Their ability to engage users through unique features such as interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity raises questions about its broader implications for social behavior and media use.

2.4. Generation Z

Technological advancements, social justice movements, an unstable economy, and violence issues have shaped Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Chan & Lee, 2023). Unlike previous generations, they were born into a world where digital tools such as smartphones, laptops, and wearable devices were ubiquitous, marking them as true digital natives (Vogels et al., 2022; Eldridge, 2024). Growing up alongside the rise of mobile connectivity, the oldest members of Generation Z entered their formative

years when the first iPhone was launched in 2007 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Parent, 2023; Geiger, 2024). This intrinsic relationship with technology has profoundly influenced their habits, cultural perspectives, and social behaviors.

Living in a technology-saturated environment, they thrive on immediacy and connectivity, excelling in multitasking and engaging with global trends (Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Díaz, 2015; Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Entrepreneurial problem-solving skills, quick access to information, and adaptability define Generation Z (Chan & Lee, 2023). They value instant gratification, maintain primarily digital relationships, and prioritize diversity, often seeking cultural connections and international experiences to develop language or professional skills (Twenge et al., 2018; Throuvala et al., 2019; Parent, 2023). Moreover, their higher likelihood of completing higher education, often supported by having a college-educated adult in their lives, reflects their pragmatic approach to personal and professional development, believing their education equips them with the skills to succeed in a competitive world (Chan & Lee, 2023; Parent, 2023; Eldridge, 2024).

SM has become a pivotal tool in adolescent development, facilitating the formation of supportive peer networks and fostering a sense of belonging through self-disclosure and social support—key influences in shaping behaviours, goals, attitudes, and identity (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Throuvala et al., 2019; Szabolcs et al., 2023). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat offer adolescents dynamic spaces for self-expression through talents such as singing, dancing, or sharing personal experiences to gain validation and encouragement (Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023). However, this engagement also comes with significant risks. The constant exposure to idealized self-presentations and social comparison can contribute to self-esteem issues and psychological distress, particularly during the sensitive phase of identity formation (Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023). Moreover, the overwhelming flow of content and the tendency to seek affirmation in these virtual environments may weaken real-world social connections, while fostering unrealistic self-images and reinforcing emotionally harmful behaviours (Kerr et al., 2024).

The interests of Generation Z are diverse, encompassing a wide range of topics, including local events and personal updates shared by friends, as well as critical global issues occurring on the other side of the

globe (Scholz & Vyugina, 2019). However, a reduced ability to maintain attention is a key characteristic of Generation Z, linked to their constant exposure to excessive information (Karasek & Hysa, 2020; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). The increasing use of media presents numerous challenges, as Generation Z, despite being technologically adept, remains largely unaware of its risks. This underscores the urgent need to equip adolescents with comprehensive media literacy skills – an endeavor made more complex by the growing intricacy and lack of clarity surrounding the competencies required of both educators and teenagers (Maloș & Lăcătuș, 2023).

2.5. Uses and gratifications of SMU

Given the strong connection between Generation Z and social media, numerous researchers have employed the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to investigate the underlying motivations behind this engagement (e.g., Al-Menayes, 2015; Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Falgoust et al., 2022; Guo, 2022; Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023; Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023; Wong & McLellan, 2023). Across these studies, recurring motivations include entertainment, social interaction, information seeking, self-presentation and identity, psychological needs, escapism, passing time, creative expression, convenience, and utility. While the specific gratifications vary depending on age, gender, personality traits, and the platform in use (Kircaburun et al., 2018), certain patterns are consistently observed among adolescents.

Despite growing criticism that UGT inadequately addresses the complexities of algorithm-driven, highly interactive, and platform-shaped environments, it provides a valuable framework for analyzing individual user motivations in digital contexts. Recent studies (Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023; Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023) reaffirm its relevance in explaining how platforms like TikTok respond to diverse adolescent needs and how Gen Z selectively engages with content in an environment of abundant choice (Trang et al., 2025). Nonetheless, a critical application of UGT – one that accounts for structural and algorithmic dynamics – remains essential for interpreting informal learning on social media today.

While numerous authors have examined diverse gratifications associated with SM use, Brailovskaia et al. (2020) systematically categorized these into five comprehensive groups that are particularly relevant to this study. Brailovskaia et al. (2020) conducted a survey involving 485 students in Germany and subsequently performed an inductive qualitative content analysis to identify the primary categories underlying the reasons for social media use (SMU): search for social interaction, search for information and inspiration, escape from negative emotions, search for positive emotions, beat of boredom and pastimes.

2.6. SMU for educational purposes

The current generation of young people, raised alongside advanced digital media, exhibits greater internet proficiency than previous generations and strongly prefers interactivity (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Their constant exposure to technology has influenced their learning habits, communication methods, and educational expectations (Chan & Lee, 2023). The extensive use of digital tools by today's youth sets them apart from earlier generations, necessitating significant educational changes to align with their unique skills and interests (Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Shieh & Nasongkhla, 2023). Gen Z thrives in technology-driven environments and is discerning about the information they engage with, favoring practical or peer-generated content (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). SM provides a dynamic and rapidly growing platform that appeals to the younger generation by introducing new dimensions to the learning experience (Throuvala et al., 2019; Taddeo, 2023).

Informal learning – often unstructured and unintentional – gains increasing recognition for its role in complementing, extending, or even compensating for formal education through everyday work, family, and leisure activities (Taddeo, 2023). Social media holds significant potential to connect informal and formal learning, as a valuable tool for facilitating social learning (Kumar & Nanda, 2022). SM's unique characteristics, such as its public accessibility, rapidity, and openness, promote users' social advancement and information acquisition (Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023; Shieh & Nasongkhla, 2023). Consequently, it has facilitated the creation of advanced, personalised learning environments that are exceptionally

engaging and self-driven (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Kumar & Nanda, 2022). Furthermore, SM activities align with social constructivist learning theories by promoting communication skills through decentralized and co-constructed learning environments (Manca, 2020). It can also enhance students' learning performance, with insights enriched by internal motivational factors (Hosen et al., 2021).

Greenhow and Lewin (2015) conducted twofold research to examine the impact of SM in formal and informal education. Both studies highlighted how SM provided young people with opportunities to access expertise and engage in knowledge construction while practicing self-determination in the learning process. Similarly, Szymkowiak et al. (2021) have explored how technology affects the acquisition of knowledge by Gen Z. Their results show that Gen Z prefers new technologies over traditional methods for their convenience, flexibility, and ability to learn anytime, with mobile apps being especially appealing due to the desire for autonomy in learning. More recently, Guo (2022) highlights TikTok's potential as an educational tool, noting its ability to provide learning opportunities and positively shape teenagers' development. TikTok fosters multimedial skills by offering a wide array of picture and video editing tools; moreover, they can explore and express their identity, fulfil their need for self-actualization, and connect with others. The authors emphasize the need for further research on adolescent learning through SM and its potential benefits for learning in both formal and informal contexts (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Barrot, 2020; Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Onjewu et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

This study employs expert interviews as its research method to investigate the underexplored topic of SM as a source of informal education. The expert interview captures specialized knowledge and practical experience through a reflective yet flexible approach (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are ideal for gathering comprehensive insights from experts on complex social issues, facilitating hypothesis generation and exploratory research (Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Von Dem Berge, 2020).

Social media studies merge theory and practice, requiring input from inside experts directly involved in social processes and outside experts whose expertise stems from research and experience (Von Soest, 2022). Therefore, the experts invited for interviews are academics (Outside) and practitioners (Inside). Academics are scientists and professors specializing in new media, familiar with the digital landscape's theoretical foundations. Practitioners are educational influencers with significant reach within online communities, actively involved in creating and disseminating informational content on SM. This dual perspective thoroughly explores the SM dynamics and content production.

3.1. Data collection and sampling

The data collection process, conducted between November 2023 and February 2024, was initiated through email, where the research objectives were outlined and invitations for expert interviews were extended. Experts were selected based on their specialization in communication theories and technological fields, emphasizing ensuring diversity of expertise. Upon receiving positive responses from the experts, meetings were scheduled based on their preferences for written or audio responses. Ethical guidelines were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and fairness.

Experts from Romania and Germany were selected for this study to provide an in-depth perspective. While Romania's involvement in this field is still in its infancy, with only a limited number of educational influencers, Germany has already established itself in this area, hosting numerous accounts dedicated to disseminating information and knowledge. Additionally, research on education through SM in Germany is more advanced than in Romania (Opfermann et al., 2020; Rau & Grell, 2022), offering an extra dimension for the comparative analysis. The interviews (N=13) were conducted with three academics and three practitioners from Romania and Germany. In addition, one expert from the USA was included, specializing in the intersection of SM and education. All interviews were conducted by the author, either via video conferencing platforms or in person, depending on the availability and preferences of the experts. In several cases, written responses were provided instead of

live interviews. The semi-structured interview guides were adapted for each expert group (academics and practitioners), with both versions containing 12 guiding questions. The synchronous interviews had an average duration of 60 to 90 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed, and written responses were compiled for analysis. These guides follow a semi-structured format and contain guiding questions aimed at focusing the discussion on the intended topics. The experts are listed below in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Description of Sample: Academics

Identifier/ Respondent	Position	Background
1A.	Professor Dr. in Computer Science with a focus on Web Development at the Faculty of Media at Kiel University of Applied Sciences	Kiel, Germany
2A.	Lecturer for Special Tasks, Computer Science and Media at the Leipzig University of Applied Sciences for Technology, Economics, and Culture	Leipzig, Germany
3A.	Professor Dr. für Corporate Communication an der Fakultät Medien der Hochschule Mittweida	Mittweida, Germany
4A.	University Lecturer Dr. at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations at the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences	Bucharest, Romania
5A.	University Lecturer Dr. at the Faculty of Political, Administrative, and Communication Sciences at Babeș-Bolyai University	Cluj-Napoca, Romania
6A.	University Lecturer Dr. habil. at the Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy, and Communication Sciences at the West University of Timișoara	Timișoara, Romania
7A.	Professor Dr. phil., Harvard in Educational Psychology and Educational Technology at the College of Education, Michigan State University	Michigan, USA

Table 2

Description of Sample: Practitioners

Identifier/ Respondent	Organisation	Position	Followers	Background
8P.	MrWissen2Go	Journalist, Youtuber	I: 244K Y: 2.23M	Germany
9P.	Quarks	Editor-in-Chief for TikTok	I: 1.5M T: 228K Y: 816K	Germany
10P.	fluter.	Social Media Editor	I: 114K Y: 8.5K	Germany
11P.	Politică la Minut	Co-founder Politică la Minut	I: 150K T: 2.5K	Romania
12P.	Gen, Știri	Co-founder MediaGen	I: 160K T: 86K Y: 2.2K	Romania
13P.	Recorder	Product Manager at Recorder	I: 278K T: 248.5K Y: 812K	Romania

4. Analysis of results

The responses are analyzed using content-structuring qualitative content analysis, combining deductive and inductive categories. Following transcription, the material was processed manually through sequential stages: familiarization with the data, identification of coding units, assignment of codes, and development of thematic categories. Main categories are deductively derived and adapted from the Social Media Usage (SMU) model by Brailovskaia et al. (2020). These categories provided a theoretical structure for examining adolescents' motivations and behaviors on social media. In contrast, subcategories and specific codes were derived inductively from the interview data, enabling the identification of emergent themes and context-specific insights. Hence, the *search for information and inspiration* has been coded

separately to ensure a stronger focus on the search for information. Additionally, *escaping negative emotions* has found no support in the data.

The coding process allowed for the exploration of both the positive outcomes and potential risks associated with adolescents' engagement with educational content on social media and the identification of effective content creation practices as highlighted by the interviewed experts. The data is systematically coded, creating an overview for deeper analysis. Table 3 below outlines the entire coding structure, including categories and sub-codes derived inductively and deductively

Table 3

The Categories of the Thematic Content Analysis

Categories of the thematic content analysis		
Categories	Codes	Sub-codes
The contribution of consuming educational content to personal development	Search for social interaction	Belonging
		Self-expression
	Search for positive emotions	Entertainment
		Curiosity
	<i>Beat of boredom and pastime</i>	
	Search for information	Knowledge
		Skills
	Search for inspiration	General
		Specific
Concerns regarding the consumption of educational content	Cognitive effects	Cognitive overload
		Superficial processing of complex information
		Reduced attention span
	Socio-psychological effects	Addiction and overuse
		Social comparison and self-esteem
	Information and security threats	Mis-, dis- and malinformation
		Echochambers
		Cyber-bullying

Key elements of effective educational content	Strategies
	Formats
	Topics
	Guiding principles
	Impact

4.1. The contribution of consuming educational content for personal development

The most frequently mentioned benefit, as perceived by the experts, is the search for social interaction, driven by both needs for **belonging** and self-expression (Respondents 3A, 4A, 5A, 10P). Experts agree that digital networks increasingly replace analogue ones, creating safe spaces for sharing interests and sensitive topics. This can counteract loneliness and provide psychological relief (Respondents 10P, 4A, 3A). These communities extend beyond personal presence relationships (Respondent 2A) and allow unlimited communication, enabling real-time exchanges with people worldwide (Respondents 8P, 13P, 5A). SM also provides an easy medium for communication in smaller friend circles (Respondents 8P, 11P, 4A) to see what your friends and followers are doing (Respondent 11P).

The search for social interaction is also fulfilled by the need for **self-expression**, especially “through participation in social life” (Respondent 3A). Experts argue these interactions are essential for identity formation (Respondents 13P, 10P, 4A). SM provides young people the opportunity to express themselves freely, often under the protection of anonymity (Respondents 4A, 13P), to “give voice to thoughts or feelings they would otherwise not express publicly” (Respondent 4A). This anonymous environment enables them to experiment and express themselves without fear of negative consequences or social rejection. At the same time, the digital space offers a platform where young people can find social support (Respondents 7A, 3A), strengthening their sense of belonging and acceptance.

According to the experts, the second most important benefit of SM use is the search for information. Through social networks, young people can acquire both knowledge and skills. All experts agree that SM provides

access to almost unlimited information, making these platforms a valuable resource. Concepts such as micro-learning (Respondents 1A, 2A), self-directed learning (Respondents 2A, 3A, 7A, 10P), and digital learning (Respondent 8P) were mentioned as key terms. As a result, “they might interact with media and learning in a different way than traditionally” (Respondent 2A). On SM, young people can access various topics, “they find information and learn how certain things work” (Respondent 11P). The driving force behind this learning process is intrinsic motivation, allowing adolescents to choose what to explore and what interests them (Respondents 2A, 3A, 6A, 7A, 10P).

The scope of personal development extends to the specific **skills** young people acquire while engaging with SM. Primarily, active use of SM enhances media literacy (Respondents 2A, 3A, 6A). As a result, young people possess a “high level of competence in searching for and selecting information” (Respondent 6A), as well as “the ability to use different types of media” (Respondent 2A), enabling them to critically question, evaluate, and engage responsibly with media content. In addition, young people can also gain practical knowledge. Experts largely concur that SM offers easy-to-understand tutorials on a wide range of topics, from cooking techniques to creative projects and problem-solving, microlearning through short videos providing an effective way to teach practical skills (Respondent 1A). Moreover, young people “test and learn various skills, such as creating websites and artistic expression through music, collages, films, and photography. They are highly active, very creative, and acquire skills typically taught in vocational courses” (Respondent 6A).

All experts emphasize that, in the pursuit of information gathering to expand **knowledge**, the search for information includes an interest in current events, global and local news, and various other topics. Young people want to stay “up to date, they get current information very quickly, you’re basically at the pulse of time” (Respondent 8P). Some even “mainly or exclusively get their information from social media, because these now offer a wide range” (Respondent 9P). A key advantage lies in the speed at which information is available online (Respondents 8P, 11P, 2A, 3A), even in real-time (Respondent 3A). SM has become an indispensable resource for information gathering in the daily lives of young people.

The search for **positive emotions, entertainment**, and simple **curiosity** plays a central role in adolescents' use of SM. It should not be overlooked, as these motivations are essential to their engagement with these platforms. All experts agree that entertainment is a fundamental function and a significant benefit of SMU. Positive emotions and curiosity drive teenagers to explore new things and engage with intriguing content or the diverse functionalities offered by these platforms (Respondents 2A, 6A). Additionally, social platforms are frequently used to **beat boredom** and serve as a **pastime** (Respondents 3A, 4A, 6A, 9P, 11P), providing a distraction and allowing individuals to escape from everyday life (Respondent 9P). As noted by respondent 3A: "Social networks fill this time and offer diverse content." However, despite the potential for SM to inspire, this aspect is rarely mentioned by experts.

4.2. Concerns regarding the consumption of educational content

SM plays a vital role in adolescents' daily lives, but its benefits come with notable concerns. Experts frequently highlight cognitive effects, particularly the challenges posed by the unlimited flow of information, which acts as "a double-edged sword" (Respondent 1A). While it offers diverse options and entertainment, it can lead to **cognitive overload** (Respondents 12P, 1A, 4A, 5A, 11P), causing some to feel so overwhelmed that they withdraw completely from SM use (Respondent 11P). Rapid and constant overstimulation also affects **information processing**, as adolescents often engage with complex topics superficially (Respondents 1A, 2A, 5A, 8P). This flood of short, fast-paced content "creates an illusion of knowledge transfer, where it is believed that by watching very short videos, one is knowledgeable about a topic" (Respondent 8P). Experts lament that adolescents' **attention has significantly decreased** (Respondents 1A, 2A, 4A, 5A, 8P, 12P), as "TikTok has changed the overall pace of information consumption" (Respondent 12P). This lack of attention carries over into the educational process, where adolescents' attention in school has also declined (Respondents 1A, 4A, 5A) and beyond learning, "leading to less patience also with people" (Respondent 12P).

SM also has significant effects on the **socio-psychological well-being** of adolescents. The long hours adolescents spend online are particularly concerning for parents, leading to **overuse**. Experts frequently compare this to an **addiction** (Respondent 12P) – “every like releases endorphins” (Respondent 1A), which underscores the potential adverse effects on the emotional and social well-being of young people. These immediate rewards can lead individuals to continuously retreat to these platforms to feel better or distract themselves from problems (Respondent 4A). Adolescents spend far too much time online, neglecting other aspects of their lives, such as personal interactions, homework, sleep, meals, etc. (Respondents 1A, 5A, 7A, 11P, 13P), as respondent 4A notes: “You go online for five minutes and forget to get off at your bus stop; forget to eat.” The strong presence of adolescents in the digital space leads to a disconnect from the real world, as they spend so much time in virtual environments, their perception of the physical world diminishes, while also being trapped by FOMO – the fear of missing out (Respondents 1A, 13P, 4A).

During the critical phase of identity formation, the influences of SM are particularly relevant. Most experts highlight that one of the most significant effects is the constant **social comparison**, leading to **self-esteem** issues. External factors heavily influence adolescents as they compare themselves “in terms of physical appearance, sexual orientation, academic engagement, and much more” (Respondent 5A). Seeking validation from others, they increasingly feel inadequate when comparing themselves to peers online, leading to depression and mental health issues (Respondents 5A, 7A). Influencers also promote unrealistic lifestyles, showcasing materialism and perfection, which adolescents do not critically question (Respondent 3A). These comparisons foster unrealistic expectations about self-image (Respondent 13P), particularly for young women, for whom “it becomes a project in which a lot of time is invested, and in the process, one forgets who they really are” (Respondent 4A).

Experts highlight concerns about **information and security threats** in the digital space, particularly in the form of **mal-, mis-, and disinformation**. In the era of user-generated content, curating information becomes impossible, as unprocessed content spreads rapidly without context (Respondent 12P). Adolescents, in particular, fall victim to fake news due to their difficulty distinguishing between entertaining and factual content, especially when

shared by friends (Respondents 11P, 4A, 12P, 9P). They are taught little about differentiating fake from genuine information (Respondents 11P, 12P). Experts note that algorithms, like TikTok's, can quickly create **echo-chambers**, fostering rapid shifts toward radical views, where dissent becomes costly (Respondents 12P, 1A, 11P, 13P). Moreover, the anonymity afforded by digital platforms (Respondent 3A) enables harmful acts such as **cyberbullying**, hate speech, stalking, and exploitation, which are often mentioned, causing psychological trauma, physical harm, and further eroding trust in these spaces.

4.3. Key elements of effective educational content

The third part of the analysis focuses on the factors contributing to successfully creating youth-oriented educational content on Instagram and TikTok. The practitioners' experiences serve both as examples of good practices for the proper and efficient design of academic content and as a source of key principles that should be followed. Drawing from their expertise, the practitioners have formulated a blueprint for successful content in education. Their insights can be categorized into five key components. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of each category.

4.3.1. Strategies

The experts identify various elements that contribute to an effective strategy and are essential for managing a SM page. To succeed on SM, having a clearly defined niche is essential. This niche can refer to the specific topic one aims to cover. For example: "We have a very well-established thematic area: politics in Romania, the European Union, Europe, and the U.S. elections" (Respondent 11P). Additionally, it is essential to have a clearly defined target audience (Respondents 12P, 9P). As respondent 12 explains: "We're addressing a 17-year-old boy, attending an average school, who cannot afford to study abroad or participate in exchange programs. That's the media landscape in Romania" (Respondent 12P). The best strategy for communicating with the selected audience "is speaking to them on

an equal footing and simple terms” (Respondent 13P). Thus, respondent 12P points out a key rule of journalism in digital media: “Don’t assume your reader understands certain things.”

Central to the content creation strategy is conveying information: “It requires good storytelling, compelling dramaturgy, a narrative arc, and a clear thread to follow” (Respondent 8P). The decision to watch the video is often made within the first seconds of the video: “However, if they decide to watch it, our experience shows that it can last 30 seconds to a minute” (Respondent 9P). A captivating introduction is therefore essential, while the first 2–3 seconds are attention-grabbing. Young audiences also prefer concise and precise information delivery (Respondent 11P). Experts propose finding a balance: “The challenge lies in offering information that is essential but not overlooking the necessary context” (Respondent 11P).

Furthermore, it is important to involve the audience in the discourse. The main difference from television lies in the potential for interaction – “that viewers can also engage with the creators” (Respondent 8P). Thus, fostering engagement through discussions, direct messages, comments, and reactions (Respondent 8P) is key. Lastly, the content design should also be considered, with visual elements crafted to be appealing or even humorous to capture attention (Respondent 11P).

4.3.2. Topics

The decision to watch a video is influenced by both the choice of topics and the design of the content (Respondents 9P, 10P). “The content that resonates best is always that which is closely connected to the lives of the followers and offers points of reference.” (Respondent 10P) Therefore, topics should be presented contextually grounded and relatable, addressing young people’s current life situations and relevant questions to foster genuine engagement and interest. However, certain topics attract exceptionally high levels of attention. In line with their specific niche, content creators highlight some particularly well-received themes and others less appealing to young audiences. A comparison of the popular topics highlighted by experts in Germany and Romania revealed no significant differences, indicating that young people are attracted to similar subjects.

The topics that experience a sudden surge in views are often current issues that gain traction during specific periods or arise in response to global events of interest. As one expert aptly states, “the topics currently discussed in society can quickly go viral if the timing is captured precisely” (Respondent 11P). Equally significant are topics directly impacting the viewers’ daily lives, such as school, education, or jobs (Respondents 10P, 12P). Additionally, recurring, seasonal topics consistently resurface, such as summer, vacations, and similar events. One expert notes: “There are also so-called evergreen topics that always perform well” (Respondent 9P). According to the practitioners, evergreen topics include sexuality, drugs, sleep patterns, identity-related concerns, and nostalgia for childhood movies or series. These subjects possess timeless appeal and resonate with a broad audience. Other topics that generate particular interest include LGBTQIA+, politics, and education (Respondent 12P). These areas can be polarizing and spark lively discussions, leading to increased engagement and visibility.

4.3.3. *Formats*

Furthermore, it is imperative to present content in formats that are familiar to young audiences and to ensure that it is consistent with current trends (Respondent 13P). Both young people and platforms now favour specific formats that resonate particularly well. With TikTok’s rise and the introduction of Instagram Reels, the focus has shifted toward video content (Respondents 3A, 10P, 11P, 12P), lasting up to one minute, the preferred length for young audiences. However, carousel formats on Instagram remain effective (Respondents 11P, 12P, 13P), as they are easily shareable and allow users to consume content without leaving the platform. As respondent 12P observes, “I think our audience is smart enough not to limit themselves to just pictures, even if they aren’t outstanding; they’re better than plain text.” The preferred formats vary depending on the platform, as the TikTok specialist 9P explains: “On Instagram, we use image tiles or short animated videos, whereas on TikTok, people present the topic directly in front of the camera.”

4.3.4. *Guiding principles*

Developing content specifically tailored to young audiences holds significant influence but also comes with substantial responsibility, as Respondent 9P underlines: “We bear enormous responsibility, regardless of whether we have a million followers or just 100” (Respondent 9P). Consequently, content producers must adhere to established principles that guide their work and ensure the delivery of suitable and impactful content to their target audience. The fundamental principle all practitioners highlight is the accuracy and objectivity of the information shared. For instance, respondent 8P stresses: “For me, it’s simply important that the content we offer is correct, verified, and reliable.” Given platforms like TikTok’s rapid and transient nature, the transparency in addressing possible errors is crucial (Respondents 9P, 8P, 11P). Furthermore, it is critical to consider suggestions, comments, and criticism and to approach them openly as this contributes to “advancing educational dissemination, exploring new approaches, and engaging people on a different level, making an impact to some extent” (Respondent 8P).

Content creators are also responsible for transparently communicating their principles and values (Respondents 11P, 10P) and adhering to them consistently. This is particularly important when handling political content. It is essential to remain objective while upholding “democratic principles, striving for political independence but supporting important values”, as highlighted by respondent 11P. An ethically grounded approach is essential to foster young people’s healthy development and ensure they engage responsibly with the content presented to them. Respondent 12P elaborates on this phenomenon: “We reflect on the impact certain news can have as we encounter significant polarization and aggression in the public sphere.” Lastly, keeping promises is a key guiding principle that should be followed (Respondent 8P) more precisely, ensuring that the topics promised in the title are fully addressed by the end of the video. These promises must be realistic, as full event coverage is impossible.

4.3.5. *Impact*

Educational content represents the output of influencers' work, while the principles define their approach. However, the main question remains: Why do they do this? The final section, therefore, focuses on the intended impacts and goals they aim to achieve through their activities. Despite varying objectives and impacts, all practitioners aim to promote young people's personal development, helping them progress beyond their previous state. This shared goal unites their efforts to sustainably expand young people's knowledge, skills, and perspectives.

Most interviewed practitioners share a common goal, as respondent 9P summarizes: "Our mission is to inform people and enable them to use information for themselves." Similarly, respondent 10P highlights the importance of "ensuring balanced information delivery and drawing attention to topics that are not always at the forefront." Lastly, Respondent 13P underscores the "main goal is to provide the public with accurate and honest information; the impacts can take many forms." Furthermore, influencers focus on sparking interest (Respondents 8P, 9P, 11P, 13P). This interest can be directed toward deeper insights, as respondent 8P explains: "The information can be transferred into knowledge, while simultaneously generating enthusiasm or interest in a topic." Additionally, they "encourage engagement with political implications", such as participating in elections or joining a political party (Respondent 11P), as well as "fostering civic involvement" (Respondent 12P). This spectrum ranges from individual benefits, such as acquiring new knowledge, to concrete steps and actions aimed at fostering both personal and societal development.

5. Discussions

The expert interviews addressed a relatively unexplored topic in the existing literature, with only collateral studies providing context: the potential of social media platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok, to serve as sources of informal education for adolescents. Although this perspective appeared novel to some experts, there was unanimous agreement that adolescents can derive significant educational benefits from social media, provided they are guided to navigate its drawbacks effectively.

Experts identified numerous advantages of social media use among young people. They emphasized, in line with previous literature, that the search for social interaction and self-expression is the primary benefit, fostering a sense of belonging and identity formation (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023; Wong & McLellan, 2023). This is often achieved through creating communities where young people can express themselves anonymously and without fear of rejection (Rodgers et al., 2020; Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023; Parent, 2023). These networks provide both support and psychological relief (Throuvala et al., 2019; Szambolics et al., 2023), as well as opportunities for global communication and real-time exchange, complementing or, in some cases, replacing analog networks (Griffiths & Kuss, 2017; Hosen et al., 2021).

Similar to previous studies, education and personal development represent a significant advantage of social media use (Throuvala et al., 2019; Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Plaisime et al., 2020; Hosen et al., 2021). These platforms enable young people to gain knowledge and skills by providing access to diverse topics and multimedia resources, encouraging independent and purposeful learning (Throuvala et al., 2019; Ansari & Khan, 2020; Hosen et al., 2021; Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Guo, 2022). The virtually limitless amount of available information, along with concepts such as micro-learning, self-directed learning, and digital learning, make social media a valuable resource that can complement traditional learning methods, in accordance with the results of Szymkowiak et al. (2021).

In addition to knowledge transmission, social media also fosters the development of practical skills (Szymkowiak et al., 2021; West et al., 2023). According to experts, young people enhance their media literacy skills, searching and critically evaluating information as they use SM to follow current events, global and local news (Newman et al., 2020; Masullo et al., 2022). These competencies extend beyond gathering information and enable critical engagement with media content. Young people can pick up skills in photography, video production, and creative projects, supported by well-designed learning content and tutorials (Guo, 2022). Entertainment, curiosity, and the need to overcome boredom remain valid motivations of SMU for young people, previously proven by recent studies (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023).

Despite the multiple advantages of SMU, there are still significant costs, disadvantages, and risks. The most mentioned issues refer to the information overload (Heiss et al., 2023). Experts warn that social media's rapid, swipe-based consumption reduces attention spans, persistence in learning, and patience in relationships, while also fostering shallow engagement and hindering critical thinking due to sensory overload and quick information intake (Karasek & Hysa, 2020; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). The information overflow makes it impossible to curate information (Selnes, 2024) and leads to the spread of disinformation, as demonstrated especially in the COVID-19 pandemic, and widely discussed in research (Corbu et al., 2021; Veeriah, 2021; Rotaru, 2023). The rapid dissemination of unverified content increases the risk of echo chambers, where extremist or false beliefs are reinforced (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Furthermore, social media has significant socio-psychological impacts, as excessive use is often compared to addictive behaviour, leading to neglect of daily tasks and social interactions, which can affect teenagers' emotional and social well-being (Popat & Tarrant, 2022). During the critical phase of identity formation, social media is incredibly influential and can have harmful effects, mainly due to constant social comparison, leading to self-esteem issues and psychological difficulties like depression (Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023; Szambolics et al., 2023). Experts emphasize that uncritical alignment with idealized portrayals of influencers and comparison with peers creates unrealistic self-images, damaging emotional and social health (Berne et al., 2014). As psychologists have concluded in research (Kerr et al., 2024), our results show that the intense use of the digital world can weaken connection to the real world, neglecting personal interactions and contributing to social anxiety and reduced ability for direct interpersonal communication.

The formula for successful content creation aimed at educating and informing teenagers relies on five important pillars, according to experts: strategies, formats, topics, guiding principles, and impact. The recipe starts with a careful, well-thought-out intention to make an impact. This intention should focus on advancing the target audience's development and knowledge acquisition, helping them progress in their lives. The impact can take many forms, but the shared goal is to inform the youth and to spark interest in future documentation. Once the desired outcomes are set, it is

essential to establish the guiding principles, values, and attitudes that will support the creation process and consistently adhere to them. These principles may include providing accurate, factual, and relevant information, along with a commitment to objectivity, transparency, and continuous improvement. They must be clearly communicated and consistently reflected in the content.

Thirdly, engaging adolescents requires implementing effective strategies tailored to their needs. Creating high-quality, tailored content starts with identifying a niche – an area of expertise – and defining a clear target audience. The next step is establishing effective communication by connecting with the audience equally and delivering a clear, easily understandable message. Equally important in content creation is the use of compelling and easy-to-follow storytelling. Capturing the viewer's attention within the first few seconds is critical, as this is when they decide whether the content is relevant and worth their time, as they value instant gratification (Throuvala et al., 2019; Parent, 2023). A strong opening, concise delivery of information, and a straightforward narrative ensure that the adolescents remain interested and invested in the message being conveyed (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). Lastly, it is important to involve the audience, fostering engagement between the viewers and creators.

The selected formats and topics may vary. However, experts have identified impactful engagement patterns. Consistent with prior research, young adults demonstrate a preference for short-form video content (Guo, 2022; CJI, 2023), though image-based formats remain effective, particularly on platforms like Instagram. The most impactful topics align closely with the target audience's interests and everyday experiences. For adolescents, these primarily include school, education, career prospects, and trending issues that generate widespread interest (Scholz & Vyugina, 2019). Additionally, seasonal themes, such as vacations or travel, and timeless subjects, including nostalgia, sexuality, identity, and sleep-related content, resonate strongly with this demographic.

6. Conclusions

SM plays a significant role in the lives of Gen Z and the following generations. Given its persistent presence, it is essential to focus more on strategies

that enable teenagers to harness their vast potential for their benefit. Therefore, the present study explores the multidimensional impact of SM use among adolescents, focusing on the motives and behaviors driving engagement and its capacity to serve as a tool for informal learning while also contouring a guideline for content creators. The research offers both theoretical and practical implications by providing insights for researchers, journalists, educators, and parents.

This study expands the existing literature by unveiling the role of SM platforms as sources of informal learning, addressing a gap in the literature on how they can be used for self-educational purposes. It builds upon the model of reasons for SMU proposed by Brailovskaia et al. (2020), extending it by incorporating inductively derived categories of analysis. Furthermore, it also considers the downsides of SMU, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its effects. The model is viewed through an educational lens, highlighting its potential as a learning and personal development tool.

By exploring how Instagram and TikTok can function as tools for informal education, this study provides valuable practical insights for enhancing SM-based educational strategies. Practitioners can use these findings to design content that better resonates with young audiences, improving engagement and learning outcomes. Parents are offered a fresh perspective on SMU, enabling them to guide their adolescents towards a more constructive use while addressing potential risks. Additionally, educators and psychologists can better understand the motivations that drive teenagers' SM engagement, equipping them to offer more practical guidance and foster meaningful interactions with adolescents.

While this study does not directly assess Gen Z's ability to evaluate social media content credibility, interview insights offer valuable input for media literacy, especially in promoting critical thinking and fact-checking. Psychological risks like anxiety or cyberbullying are acknowledged, though not central, highlighting the need for guidance. Experts were divided – some warned against overestimating the educational value of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, while others noted their potential if used thoughtfully. Future research should incorporate mental health perspectives for a more holistic view.

Drawing on expert insights, several policy-level recommendations emerge concerning adolescents' educational use of social media. The findings emphasize the importance of an educational framework integrating media literacy, addressing digital self-education, well-being, and citizenship. Policymakers should also prioritize the creation of safe and supportive online environments by tackling risks like harmful content, cyberbullying, and privacy violations. Furthermore, the changing legal and ethical landscape – marked by growing regulatory efforts such as age verification, parental consent, and restrictions on addictive algorithmic features – reflects an increasing awareness of the need for protective measures.

The limitations of this research arise from its qualitative nature and small expert sample due to time constraints. Further interviews with a broader range of experts are needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of informal education on SM. Future research should focus on gaps such as young users' attitudes, media consumption patterns, and the impact of social networks on identity, professional growth, and career paths. Exploring consumer behavior and attention patterns on SM could also enhance educational practices. A hybrid research approach combining qualitative with quantitative techniques and including parents, educators, and policymakers would offer a more holistic perspective on SM's role in shaping adolescents.

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