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**When Social Media Takes Over: Overload,
Vulnerability, and Coping Among Young Adults
in Marketing-Saturated Social Media**

Marketing / Department of Marketing
and International Business Marketing

Master's thesis

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Social media has become an important part of young adults' everyday lives. At the same time, however, it has become increasingly marketing-saturated and algorithmically controlled, which is reflected in various negative consequences, such as overload. Although previous research has focused extensively on social media overload, there has been considerably less research on how this overload affects young people's everyday experiences and how they themselves cope with these situations.

This study fills this gap by examining how young consumers experience social media overload in a marketing-saturated environment. Furthermore, it explores how overload manifests itself as situational digital vulnerability and what strategies young people develop to cope with these vulnerable experiences. The aim of the study is to better understand young people's experiences of social media overload, situational digital vulnerability, and how they themselves can influence their own digital well-being.

The study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews and follows an interpretative and inductive research approach. The results show that social media overload is more than just too much information and noise. It is a holistic feeling that arises from how algorithms select the content to be displayed, how commercialization is constant, and how users are constantly required to pay attention. These factors give rise to situations in which young consumers' perceived agency and control are weakened, and exposure to content and marketing can be experienced as happening outside their control. Digital vulnerability is therefore not a permanent characteristic, but a context-dependent and situational experience that is constructed through the everyday use of social media.

The findings of the research show that young consumers do not remain passive when faced with overload and vulnerability. Instead, they seek ways to manage the situation. They may withdraw from situations, curate content, set temporal and spatial boundaries, or even resist algorithms. While these methods may offer temporary relief, they do not necessarily lead to long-term solutions. Young consumers are constantly forced to negotiate asymmetrical power relations in which digital platforms maintain a structural advantage. As a result, self-regulation can feel fragile, require a lot of effort, and be contradictory.

By combining literature on social media overload, algorithmic power, marketing saturation, and consumer vulnerability, this study deepens our understanding of young consumers' experiences in today's digital environments. The findings contest individual responsibility and highlight the need to view social media as a structural and commercial environment that shapes users' agency, freedom of choice, and experiences of vulnerability.

Key words: situational digital vulnerability, social media overload, young adults, marketing-saturated social media, coping, digital self-regulation

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1 Introduction

“And like with the scrolling, it just happens to me. Like it just... and then the time is gone. And I did not... well, I never even really wanted to do it in the first place.” (P2)

“Have to play smart. Still the algorithm is smarter than you and you lose anyways. It feels in a way that you are fighting against it, using all kinds of rational methods against algorithms. But what can I do as a human if they’re playing with my brain chemistry?” (P4)

“And I feel like, I kind of feel inhumane just because I feel perceived just as a person who buys and just a victim. I feel like they're trying to brainwash me... Just like push, push, push, push, push. This product, this product, 10 products. No, no, you, you, you, better, fancier, more expensive. Get it. Get it now. Get it. Get it!” (P12)

1.1 Background

Social media has established itself as a significant part of young adults' everyday lives, communication, and consumption, providing a stage for almost any conceivable everyday activity (Merlici, Maftai & Opariuc-Dan 2025, 2445; Saura, Gelashvili & Martínez-Navalón 2025, 233). User numbers have grown year on year, reaching a staggering 5.66 billion in 2025 (Statista 2025). However, rising user numbers do not necessarily mean increased participation, and the number of active social media users has actually declined in the recent years (Chen & Yu 2024, 1; DataReportal 2025). Recent studies have shown that more and more people are experiencing negative consequences from being online, which in turn is damaging their well-being. (Gan 2024, 1121; Tyrväinen, Pirkkalainen, Salo & Karjaluo 2025, 1).

One of the most studied negative consequences of social media is overload, which occurs when social media use exposes users to constant demands and stimuli that exceed their cognitive resources (Fu, Li, Liu, Pirkkalainen & Salo 2020, 10). Some researchers believe that social media has reached a certain saturation point, meaning that there is an oversupply of content and platforms created by users, influencers, and brands (Atienza-Barthelemy, Losada & Benito 2025, 1). Social media has fundamentally changed the amount of information that individuals have to process on a daily basis. (Matthes, Karsay, Schmuck & Stevic 2020, 1). As a result, users are no longer simply

consuming information; instead, they are navigating an environment of continuous cognitive demand (Roetzel 2019, 484).

Nevertheless, this development cannot be attributed exclusively to the growth in the amount of information but is essentially linked to the type of content produced on social media and the logic behind how it is communicated to users. Social media is an increasingly marketing-saturated environment where content produced by users, influencers, and brands overlaps seamlessly (van Dijck 2013, 30–33; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018, 10, 32–33; Atienza-Barthelemy et al. 2025, 2). In such an environment, commercial interests and algorithmic curation guide visibility and content flows in ways that shape users' everyday experiences and agency (Gillespie 2014, 167–170; Beer 2017, 2–5). Thus, overload is not only a cognitive challenge but also an aspect of a media environment that is structurally organized by commercial and algorithmic logics. In such conditions, users' sense of control is necessarily partial and mediated rather than fully autonomous. (Bucher 2017, 38–41; van Dijck et al. 2018, 9–13.) This dynamic lays the groundwork for situational digital vulnerability.

In previous research, vulnerability has often been linked to permanent individual characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, or psychological resources (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg 2005, 129). However, later research (e.g. Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020) has emphasized that vulnerability can also arise situationally, from the combined effects of certain environments, practices, and structural factors. This shift implies that vulnerability is potentially situational and widely distributed rather than limited to predefined groups. In the context of social media, this refers to moments when the user's sense of agency is weakened, and their use of the platform begins to feel more like something that is "happening" to them rather than the result of their active choices (LaRose, Lin & Eastin 2003, 228).

However, young users do not remain passive in the face of these burdening and vulnerable experiences in social media. Instead, they actively deploy a range of coping and self-regulation strategies to manage overload and mitigate situational digital vulnerability (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, 141–142; Luqman, Cao, Ali, Masood & Yu 2017, 548; Qahri-Saremi, Vaghefi & Turel 2021, 69). These practices can be understood as ongoing efforts to restore, preserve, or renegotiate agency under structurally constricted conditions (Bandura 1991, 249–252; LaRose et al. 2003, 232). Grasping these strategies is therefore crucial for identifying the limits and possibilities of user agency within algorithmically structured social media platforms (van Dijck et al. 2018; Turel &

Qahri-Saremi 2016).

1.2 Research gap and academic relevance

Over the past decade, research on social media has expanded rapidly across multiple disciplines (Baumer et al. 2013, 3257; Yap, Xu & Tan 2021, 1247). In psychology and information systems research in particular, social media overload has been extensively examined using quantitative methods, with a focus on measurable individual-level outcomes such as stress, exhaustion, and discontinuance intentions (e.g., Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier, Laumer, Eckhardt & Weitzel 2015; Lee, Son & Kim 2016; Whelan, Islam & Brooks 2020). While this body of work has generated important understandings of the effects of overload, it has largely conceptualized overload as a variable at the individual level, rather than an experience embedded in structurally organized, commercially driven media environments.

At the same time, critical platform research convincingly demonstrated that social media operates through economic, algorithmic, and marketing logics that actively shape visibility, attention, and participation (see, e.g., Gillespie 2014; Beer 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019). However, empirical studies that connect these structural system logics to users' lived experiences of overload and weakened agency remain fragmented. In other words, research has tended to analyze either the structural conditions of platforms or the psychological outcomes of use, but rarely the experiential intersection between the two.

A similar fragmentation is evident in discussions of vulnerability. Within consumer research, vulnerability has traditionally been linked to relatively stable demographic or life circumstances (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020). Although the work of Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005) has been one of the significant turning points in the field of consumer research, it is only in recent research that vulnerability has been increasingly conceptualized as a situational and dynamic phenomenon arising from environmental structures – and even less so in algorithmically controlled, marketing-saturated social media environments. In particular, little research has explored how everyday moments of weakened perceived control give rise to situational digital vulnerability within commercially structured platforms.

Furthermore, marketing research has primarily focused on how consumers interpret, evaluate, and resist persuasive commercial messages (see, e.g., Friedstad & Wright 1994; Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun et al. 2017). Considerably less attention has been paid to the

experiential state in which such persuasion episodes occur. Yet overload and vulnerability shape how commercial content is noticed, interpreted, and emotionally processed. Without accounting for these conditions, our understanding of digital marketing effectiveness and consumer agency remains incomplete.

Taken together, these gaps point to a broader absence of integrative research that simultaneously addresses (1) the structural intensity of marketing-saturated social media, (2) the experiential nature of overload, (3) situational digital vulnerability, and (4) the concrete coping and self-regulation strategy examples through which users attempt to restore or renegotiate agency. Addressing this absence requires bridging insights from marketing research, platform studies, and psychological coping theory, as no single disciplinary lens alone can capture the dimensions of the phenomenon at hand.

Young adults are a particularly relevant group for examining these phenomena. They are intensive users of social media at a stage in their lives characterized by identity formation, negotiation of autonomy, and social positioning (Arnett 2000; DataReportal 2025; Pew Research Center 2025). At the same time, they are deeply attached to platform-mediated environments where commercial and social logics are intertwined (van Dijck 2013). Thus, their experiences offer a valuable perspective on how marketing saturation, overload, vulnerability, and coping strategies overlap in everyday social media use.

This study responds to the gaps identified above by examining situational digital vulnerability as a structurally produced and experientially negotiated phenomenon in a marketing-saturated social media environment. By combining the structural logic of platforms with users' experiences and coping strategies, the study makes an extension to the field of marketing research by moving from individual responsibility to the relationship between user experiences and both technological and commercial system logic. In this way, it offers a more thorough understanding of how overload, vulnerability, and coping are intertwined in current social media ecosystems and lays the foundation for multidisciplinary further research on responsible marketing and digital well-being issues.

1.3 Research aim and questions

The purpose of this study is to contribute to a more critical understanding of contemporary social media environments by examining how overload and situational digital vulnerability emerge in young adults' everyday social media use and how young users seek to navigate these environments

and maintain a sense of control over their engagement. To unpack these interrelated dynamics and to structure the empirical research, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do young adults experience social media overload in a marketing-saturated social media environments?

RQ2. How does such overload translate into situational experiences of digital vulnerability in young adults' everyday lives?

RQ3. What coping and self-regulation strategies do young adults' employ in response to this vulnerability?

Together, the research questions form a comprehensive examination in which overload, situational digital vulnerability, and coping strategies are understood as intertwined phenomena in a marketing-saturated social media environment.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This study proceeds as follows. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 present the theoretical background of the study and the key concepts that guide the framework of the thesis, which are *marketing-saturated social media environment*, *social media overload*, *situational digital vulnerability*, and *coping and digital self-regulation*. The study moves from a broader conceptual framework toward a progressively more focused level of analysis. Chapter 2 examines the commercial and algorithmic nature of social media as a marketing-saturated environment. Chapter 3 focuses on the mechanisms of social media overload, Chapter 4 examines the situational digital vulnerability, and Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical dimensions of coping and self-regulation through the lens of this work. The theory section concludes with a presentation of the conceptual framework of the study, which brings these elements together into a coherent theoretical whole.

Chapter 6 introduces the philosophical framework guiding the study and justifies the methodological choices made in this work. The chapter describes the suitability of a qualitative and interpretive research approach for examining the phenomena under study. In addition, the data collection method – specifically, the choice of semi-structured in-depth interviews – is justified, and the empirical implementation of the study is described. Finally, the data analysis process is

presented, in which the interview data is examined in an exploratory and interpretive manner through themes emerging from the data.

Chapter 7 presents the empirical results of the study. The findings are structured around the key themes from the analysis and correspond to the study's research questions. These include experiences of social media overload in marketing-saturated environments, manifestations of situational digital vulnerability, and the coping and digital self-regulation strategies used by young adults.

In Chapter 8, the results are interpreted in dialogue with the theory presented earlier. Based on this synthesis, the chapter presents an updated conceptual framework for the study, which clarifies the relationships between the main phenomena of the study. After this, chapter 9 examines the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, as well as its limitations and directions for future research. Finally, chapter 10 brings the work together by summarizing the key findings of the study and reflecting on their broader significance.

2 Marketing-saturated social media environment

“Every technology is an expression of human will. Through our tools, we seek to expand our power and control over our circumstances – over nature, over time and distance, over one another.”

(Carr 2011, The Shallows p. 44)

Social media has become one of the key social infrastructures of modern society (van Dijck 2013, 4–5; van Dijck et al. 2018, 2–4). It is a place where people share moments from their everyday lives, build perceptions of themselves and others, and seek connection with other people. Although its use appears to be a personal choice and a natural extension of everyday life, it is framed by platforms whose operations are guided by the logic of visibility, data, and commercial value (van Dijck 2013, 30–34; Gillespie 2014, 167–170).

In light of previous studies, this study adopts the view that social media is not a neutral technology, but rather a marketing-saturated environment whose structures and operating logic are strongly shaped by economic interests, platform revenue models, and practices based on the commercialization of attention (Lessig 1999; Davenport & Beck 2001; Zuboff 2019). Social media platforms not only display and distribute user-generated content, but also actively organize, prioritize, and edit content with the help of algorithms and various design solutions (Gillespie 2014, 167–170; Bucher 2017, 30–33; Zuboff 2019). This theoretical starting point forms the basis for this study. The following subsections examine the arc of social media development shortly, its non-neutrality, and how integrated marketing logics permeate everyday digital life within the framework of the study's focus.

2.1 Social media: From social interaction to commercial platforms

First, however, it's a good idea to take a moment to consider the concept of *social media* itself. Although the concept of social media is widely used, its precise definition remains somewhat open-ended and has been approached from slightly different perspectives across various academic disciplines. According to Carr and Hayes (2015, 46–47), even though we recognize what social media is, we may not necessarily be able to explain why it has taken its current form. We may be able to list various social media platforms, but we may not necessarily be able to distinguish why some of these represent social media while others do not belong on the list (Carr 2021, 240–241). However, if we view social media as a broader entity than individual technologies and consider

their common features, a relatively well-established definition may be proposed: Social media can be understood as communication channels operating on the internet that are constantly available and enable interaction and a sense of community among users. It is based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and enables the creation and sharing of user-generated content. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 60–61; Carr & Hayes 2015, 48–49.)

To understand the current role and significance of social media, it is useful to take a brief look back at its relatively recent early stages. In the early 2000s, social media platforms were still experimental spaces used by fairly limited user groups, often formed around specific interests. In 2007, only about 6 percent of the world's population over the age of 15 belonged to a social media service. However, by 2011, that percentage had risen to a striking 82 percent. (van Dijck 2013, 4.) Most of these social platforms were born out of different community-related projects – whether it was bringing together university students, creatives, photography enthusiasts, or other groups of people, and at the same time creating a whole new kind of communities online. On these platforms, friends, acquaintances, and strangers were able to exchange various types of communicative and creative content. (van Dijck 2013, 7). Within just a decade, social media had evolved from niche online communities into a global infrastructure for social interaction, increasingly shaping everyday communication and cultural life (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre 2011, 241; van Dijck 2013, 23).

Today, social media is actively used by 5.24 billion people, approximately 93.8% of the population that uses the internet (DataReportal 2025). Social media has evolved significantly from platforms that enabled sole interaction between users to complex environments whose basic structure is based on commercial logic (Stephen 2016; Kietzmann et al. 2011). According to Zhu (2025, 1–2), digital marketing is gradually replacing traditional marketing practices and has taken on a central role in companies' marketing strategies. Social media offers brands and companies unprecedentedly accurate opportunities to reach and segment users, allowing real-time interaction and cost-effective channels for marketing communications (Zhu 2025, 1–2). Van Dijck (2013, 17–18) notes that social media platforms are, and will never be, finished products, but rather react and will always react to the competitive environment and the wider economic and technological infrastructure in order to evolve and survive. Over the past decade, social media platforms have grown at a tremendous pace – some succeeding and remaining in the field, while others disappearing into cyberspace (van Dijck 2013, 17–18). The most popular social media platforms at present are YouTube, WhatsApp,

Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which have managed to hold their own in this competitive field (DataReportal 2025).

The growth and commercialization of social media platforms have shaped their operating logic in such a way that user engagement, behavior, and visibility have become key economic resources. Throughout history, entirely new currencies have emerged in this context, the most important of which are attention and data. (van Dijck et al. 2018, 10.) Davenport and Beck (2001) called this economic model the ‘Attention Economy’. According to them, in the ‘Attention Economy’, the user's attention is the most valuable and scarce resource, which companies strive to capture, engage, and monetize – basically by any means necessary. Means may include, among others, external and internal notifications in applications, personalized content, news and reviews, addictive games, opportunities for interaction, clickbait headlines, and even the use of psychological or massive A/B testing techniques to attract attention (Lane, Atchley, and Mennie 2021, 192). This has also led to explosive growth in content, as brands, institutions, influencers, and every user who creates content for social media compete for this limited attention (Atienza-Barthelemy et al. 2025, 2).

Some researchers believe that social media has reached a so-called saturation point in many areas, where the amount of content, influencers, and brands has exceeded individuals' ability to notice and process individual messages (Atienza-Barthelemy et al. 2025). In such an environment, the key question is no longer simply how much content is available, but also how this content is made visible to users. In such an environment, content visibility is not random, but requires systems that prioritize and organize what users ultimately see on their screens. (Gillespie 2014.)

2.2 Social media as a non-neutral system

The non-neutrality of social media has been argued by numerous academics, including Gillespie (2014), van Dijck et al. (2018), and Zuboff (2019), among others. According to van Dijck et al. (2018, 32; also van Dijck 2013, 15–16), social media cannot be considered a neutral “tool” because certain things are kept visible while others are kept hidden. Zuboff (2019, 185–186) takes this argument even further by pointing out that algorithms do not only function as tools for displaying or organizing information, but also as key mechanisms for monitoring, predicting, and subtly guiding user behavior. According to her, the algorithmic logic of platforms is based on the continuous collection and analysis of behavioral data, the primary goal of which is not user well-being or informational balance, but the production of predictable and commercially exploitable behavior. In

this case, what is shown to the user, when and in what order, is not random, but part of a broader economic and technological control system.

According to Gillespie (2014, 167), algorithms are, in a very wide sense, coded processes in which data is converted into the desired result based on certain calculations. The desired result, in turn, is influenced by various wishes, needs, and possibilities. Algorithms play a very central role in network environments, as they help to locate, retrieve, filter, present, or block data. (Willson 2017, 140.) Helberger, Karppinen, and D'Acunto (2018, 191) note that algorithms are always backed by commercial and various strategic decisions that determine what information we see, what information is prioritized, and what information is left out. Social media platforms increasingly rely on recommendation systems that analyze user behavior to determine what recommendations – i.e., content – will be shown to users or, conversely, not shown (Helberger et al. 2018, 191). Thus, algorithms are used to build a personalized content stream for users, which also includes advertisements and other commercial messages (Voorveld, Meppelink & Boerman 2024, 960).

However, consumers are often unaware of the extent to which algorithms control the content they see. For this reason, such influence can occur without the user noticing, and it may include features that can be considered hidden attempts to influence or even manipulate. (Bucher 2017; Susser, Roessler & Nissenbaum 2019.) Although more recent studies show that these levels of awareness are on the rise (Eg, Demirkol Tønnesen & Kolberg Tennfjord 2023, 10). According to Cotter and Reisdorf (2020, 746), due to technical complexity and lack of transparency, it is very difficult to know exactly what algorithms do behind the scenes. According to Voorveld et al. (2024), this development can be described as algorithmic persuasion, Cotter (2019, 898) has even described it as algorithmic power, which raises ethical concerns. Zarouli, Helberger, and de Vreese (2021, 135) add that the lack of transparency is further exacerbated by the fact that applications are constantly striving for a seamless user experience. This means streamlining the user experience by optimizing and hiding the visibility of different choices and intercessions (Eg et al. 2023, 16).

But algorithms do not merely organize or transmit information; they actively contribute to shaping the environment in which users interpret and perceive the world. When algorithms filter, prioritize, and organize content, they simultaneously shape not only users' experience of the platform but also, more broadly, how social reality is understood and interpreted. (Eslami et al. 2015, 153; Gillespie 2014, 167.) According to Just and Latzer (2017, 244), it is also important to note that algorithms are not, in and of themselves, neutral technical tools; rather, they are designed by people and

organizations whose decisions reflect existing social, cultural, economic, and political structures. Kitchin and Dodge (2011, 247) emphasize that in the design of software and code, the world is structured through certain conceptual and philosophical assumptions, turning reality into something that can be measured, classified, and processed algorithmically. When platforms operationalize concepts such as “relevant content” or “meaningful interactions,” they simultaneously define value for various actors, relationships, and modes of operation in the digital environment (Willson 2017, 140).

In this sense, algorithmic systems do not only reflect social reality; they also contribute to its creation and thus shape it. According to Cheney-Lippold (2011, 171), algorithms construct certain classifications and profiles of users, based on which content, advertisements, and other messages are presented to them. At the same time, these classifications shape users’ opportunities to see, encounter, and understand different people, phenomena, and perspectives in the digital environments. In this way, algorithmic systems contribute to the construction of social relationships, meanings, and experiences on platforms (Cotter 2019, 898).

2.3 Marketing embedded in social media platforms

Atienza-Barhelemy and colleagues (2025, 2) argue that, since a certain point of saturation has possibly been reached in social media, which has led to highly fragmented content – superficial and fast consumption. The growth in content volume has led to a situation where users' ability to delve into individual pieces of content and form an overall picture of them has weakened. The competition for users' attention has intensified, which has increased the efforts of brands, organizations, and influencers to stand out and reach their audiences in increasingly diverse and intense ways. (Atienza-Barthelemy et al. 2025, 2.)

As Cohen (2019, 21) states, historically, the focus of marketing communications has shifted from simply providing information (e.g., displaying advertisements) to a more active attempt at persuasion and guiding consumers. In the context of social media environments, this development is particularly evident in the fact that there has been a significant increase in the volume of advertisements. Social media advertising has indeed been criticized for its abundance and, in particular, its perceived intrusiveness. Advertising clutter can impair users' ability to pay attention to individual content and increase their experience of disruption. (Essa Tayeb, Chebbi, Badawi, Ali Toumi & Louail 2024, 352.) Similarly, research on online environments shows that excessive

advertising content reduces consumer attention and makes it difficult to distinguish meaningful content from the flow of information (Koslow & Stewart 2022, 839).

According to Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun (2017, 140), brands and organizations are increasingly seeking to influence consumers in ways that do not necessarily resemble traditional advertising. In social media, advertising and entertainment content are becoming increasingly intertwined. This type of marketing is often described as native advertising, where the commercial message is integrated into the platform's other content in such a way that it resembles user-generated content in terms of appearance and presentation. (Boerman 2020, 199–200.) Evans et al. (2017, 140) emphasize that its effectiveness is often based precisely on users' lack of understanding that it is advertising.

As a result, marketing is no longer a separate part of the user experience in social media environments but has become integrated into the everyday functioning of these digital and social platforms. Commercial messages have been integrated into content streams, recommendation systems, and interactions in a way that makes them more difficult to distinguish from other content (van Dijck 2013; van Dijck et al. 2018). Marketing is, as it were, "baked" into the platform's operations and interaction structures. This development represents a significant change from the early ideals and stages of social media, when the main function of platforms was to enable social interaction and community building. These changes affect not only the structure of these platforms, but also how users experience social media in their everyday lives. (Turow 2011, 1–7.)

3 Social media overload

In the previous section, we saw that social media platforms have enabled the massive transmission of content, and the amount of information online has grown dramatically over the years. When there is too much information, social stimuli, and activities for our eyes and brains to process, we experience overload. (Atienza-Barthelemy et al. 2025, 2.) While digital technologies have evolved rapidly over the past decades, the cognitive capacities of the human brain have remained relatively stable. In particular, human working memory is limited and poorly suited to processing large volumes of information simultaneously and at high speed. (Miller 1956; Cowan 2001.) As a result, environments characterized by continuous information streams and multiple simultaneous stimuli can easily exceed individuals' cognitive processing capacities. This phenomenon in the context of social media has also been referred to as *social media overload*. (Bright, Bardi Kleiser & Landreth Grau 2015, 149; Lee, Son & Kim 2016, 52–53.)

The concept of social media overload can be defined as a digital stress factor, which is characterized by situations in which the cognitive, social, and interactive demands placed on the user exceed their mental resources available to them. Overload in social media does not refer only to the amount of content, but also to the individual's subjective experience and assessment that there is more information, interaction, or stimuli than they are able to process or handle. (Fu et al. 2020; Eppler & Mengis 2004, 326–328.) According to Shi, Yu, Wang, Cheng & Cao (2020, 180) and Lee et al. (2016, 52), individuals can experience social media overload even with minimal social media use, which highlights the subjective and situational nature of the overload phenomenon.

The use of social media can be associated with several different types of overload experiences (Whelan et al. 2020, 872). However, previous studies show that there is no complete consensus in the literature on social media overload regarding the specific terms that should be used to describe the different dimensions of overload. Researchers have used partly overlapping and context-specific concepts to describe the taxing aspects of social media use, such as the overload associated with constant communication or social demands. Nevertheless, a relatively established framework can be identified in the literature, in which social media overload can be seen as three intertwined dimensions: (1) information overload, (2) social overload, and (3) system feature overload (see figure 1). (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Yu, Cao, Liu & Wang 2018; Whelan et al. 2020.)

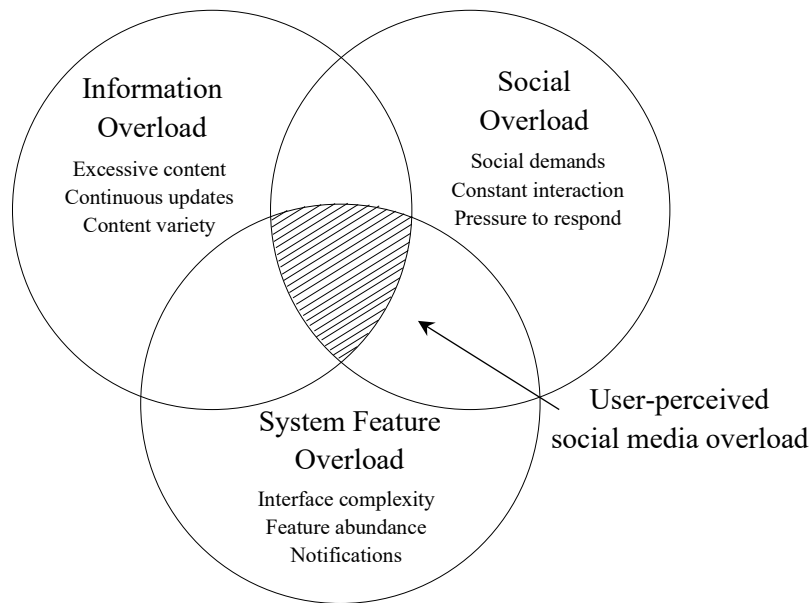


Figure 1. Social media overload, which is the combination of information, social, and system feature overloads, is used to show the impact of combined overloads on users (based on Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Yu et al. 2018; Whelan et al. 2020).

Karr-Wisniewski and Lu (2010) initially proposed a distinction between information volume, communication, and system features as forms of overload. The research on social media has since elaborated on this model, particularly with the notion of social overload (Maier et al. 2015). In this study, social media overload is examined through these three dimensions, as they cover the content, social, and technological demands that are central to understanding a marketing-saturated social media environment. This classification provides a conceptually clear and empirically grounded framework for examining how content abundance and platform structural characteristics can together create an overwhelming user experience. The following subsections examine each form of overload in more detail.

3.1 Information overload

Information overload refers to a situation in which an individual is exposed to more information than they are cognitively capable of processing, structuring, or utilizing in decision-making (Eppler & Mengis 2004; Bawden & Robinson 2009). However, information overload does not arise solely from the amount of information, but also from its complexity, overlap, contradictions, and

continuity (Roetzel 2019, 484). According to Atienza-Barthelemy et al. (2025, 11), the amount of information on social media is so vast that if users stopped following it for a moment, they would likely miss out on a large part of the content. Thus, it is not only the amount of content that is large, but also the frequency with which it is produced, with new content quickly replacing the old. For example, the Spectralplex - website allows you to see how much content of each type is uploaded to social media in just one second. This provides a concrete illustration of the scale and intensity of information flows that users are exposed to in contemporary social media environments.

According to Liu, Liu, Yoganathan, and Osburg (2021, 3), although the speed of information production and dissemination is rapidly increasing on social media, users' ability to process information is not growing at the same pace. As a result, individuals are increasingly required to cope with environments in which information accumulates faster than it can be meaningfully processed. Bhowmik (2025, 39) describes social media content as a continuous stream with no clear beginning or end. In this way, individual pieces of content are not structured into a broader or more coherent whole, which makes it more difficult for users to form deeper meanings or connections between them (Bhowmik 2025, 39).

Beyond the continuous flow of information, social media platforms contain a wide variety of content types. Although the number of active social media users has been declining, the total number of users has continued to grow. This growing number generates enormous amounts of information about their personal lives, expertise, friends, and families. (Qaisar, Kiani, & Jalil 2024, 3.) In addition, social media contains a vast amount of entertainment content, events, news, and commercial content such as advertisements, sponsored content, and product placements (Lee et al. 2016, 53; Koselioren & Çakir 2024, 654). Information conveyed through social media requires constant attention and interpretation from users, even if the content does not correspond to their own interests or needs. If this flow of information grows too large in terms of quantity and quality in relation to the user's ability to process information, the result is information overload. (Lee et al. 2016, 53.)

When information overload emerges, it can lead to a variety of negative consequences for users, such as technological stress, distraction, and errors, which in turn affect for example decision-making. When exposure to information continues for a long time and an individual's cognitive resources are depleted, this can manifest itself as exhaustion, a decline in motivation, and a feeling that one no longer has the energy or ability to relate to the content in a meaningful way. (Atienza-

Barthelemy et al. 2025, 2.) In a marketing-saturated social media environment, information overload is therefore a key dimension of social media overload as a whole, as users are constantly exposed to a diverse and rapidly changing stream of content that places significant demands on their cognitive processing resources (Fu et al. 2020; Whelan et al. 2020, 872–873).

3.2 Social overload

Given that social media is, in essence, a social environment, the overload associated with it is not therefore limited to information alone. As interactions accumulate and the sense of being socially available can intensify, users may begin to experience the social dimension of overload. In this context, Maier et al. (2015) define a dimension called *social overload*, in which the user feels that they are giving too much social support, attention, or emotional investment in relation to their own resources. This phenomenon is particularly significant among young people, for whom social media is a key tool for building identity and gaining social acceptance (Zhang, Zhao, Lu & Yang 2016; Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein 2018; Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur & Chen 2018). Social overload can therefore arise in situations where there is not a particularly large amount of information, but where the social obligations and expectations experienced by the user become excessive. However, it is important to note that social overload does not mean that social interaction or support is fundamentally negative, but rather that the number and intensity of social demands exceed the resources available to the individual. (Maier et al. 2015, 449.)

In the context of social media, social overload manifests itself particularly in situations where users feel constant pressure to be socially available and respond to interaction initiatives such as messages, updates, or reactions. If these accumulate, interaction may appear to the user to be more of an obligation than a voluntary activity. (LaRose, Connolly, Lee, Li & Hales 2014, 59; Raza, Qazi, Umer & Khan 2020, 146.) Users may feel that they must respond to messages quickly or pay constant attention to their network in order to maintain social relationships and avoid negative reactions from others. This kind of pressure can be draining, even if there isn't that much info to go through. (Stevic 2024, 3.)

The pressure to be socially available is linked to a broader change in how social media is used today as part of everyday life and in different everyday situations. Vorderer, Krömer, and Schneider (2016, 694–695) describe how, because real-life social situations and social situations on social media have become partially intertwined (e.g., watching TV, riding the bus, or hanging out with

friends and scrolling through your phone at the same time), individuals may feel like they are constantly online and connected. According to the latest data, up to 46 % of young people feel like they are online all the time (Stevic 2024, 1–2). In particular, moments that previously offered an opportunity for a break or inactivity are now filled with social media use (e.g., when queuing and waiting) (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma & Raita 2012).

According to Dunbar (1992, 2018), people have a natural upper limit for the number of relationships they can manage. In his article *The Anatomy of Friendship* (2018, 33), he states that this cognitive limit is approximately 150 users in the context of social networks. However, later research shows that social media enables networks that exceed Dunbar's limit, although the intensity and significance of these relationships can vary greatly (Gonçalves, Perra & Vespignani 2011; Lindenfors, Wartel & Lind 2021). In the case of social media, these networks often grow beyond this threshold, exposing users to social pressure or even social exhaustion (Maier et al. 2015, 449–451). If these demands exceed the user's perceived ability to respond to them, then a feeling of loss of control and overload is experienced (Cao & Sun 2018, 11). The more extensive a user's social media networks are, the more intense communication tends to be. However, frequent and repetitive interaction requests on social media can overload users' attention, which is reflected in both their ability to concentrate and their behavioral regulation. (Lin, Lin, Luo & Liu 2021, 3.)

Social overload can manifest itself in many psychological and behavioral consequences, such as emotional exhaustion, a reduced ability to disconnect from social media, and a feeling that interaction has changed from a voluntary activity to a constant obligation. When prolonged, this constant need for attention and response can undermine an individual's sense of autonomy and increase feelings of stress and fatigue in everyday social media use. (Maier et al. 2015, 447–448; Dhir et al. 2018, 349–350; Cao & Sun 2018, 11.) In this sense, social overload illustrates how the interaction structures of social media platforms can transform social interaction from a source of strength into a source of stress.

3.3 System feature overload

In addition to information and social overload, a third dimension of overload has been identified in the context of social media, commonly referred to as *system feature overload*. System feature overload refers to a situation where the various features offered by technology exceed the user's needs, thus complicating the use of that technology. (Fu et al. 2020, 4.) Research on technology

stress (also, 'Technostress') has shown that unnecessary and excessive features distract users and increase cognitive load, which affects an individual's performance in a given environment and task (Ayyagari, Grover & Purvis 2011, 839–842; Qaisar et al. 2024, 4).

System feature overload is particularly pronounced in social media environments, where platforms are constantly being developed. According to Fu and Li (2022, 549), large social media platforms in particular are constantly being updated, which means that users must continuously learn new features. Tyrväinen et al. (2025, 3) add that platforms are constantly being enriched with new filters that can be used to edit images, videos, or audio, for example. They emphasize that the frequency of such updates can exceed users' ability to constantly adapt to the new social media landscape, which in turn leads to system feature overload. Research on system feature overload has identified two key technological factors, which are: (1) system complexity and (2) speed of change. Complexity refers to how difficult it is to use and understand the system, while the speed of change describes how often users experience changes in the technological environment. (Lee et al. 2016, 54.) When platforms add new features or change their user interfaces rapidly, users may find it difficult to keep up with the changes, which can lead to system overload (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010, 1062; Tyrväinen et al. 2025, 3).

In modern social media platforms, system feature overload manifests itself particularly in the constant expansion of user interfaces and functionalities. Platforms offer a wide range of diverse content formats, personalization settings, storytelling tools, real-time features, and numerous notification and interaction options. Although these additions are often intended to enrich the user experience, their combined effect can lead to situations where it is difficult for the user to understand, control, or utilize the available functionality without significant cognitive effort. (Gan 2024, 1124; Fu et al. 2020, 5.) Research on technological stress has shown that technological complexity increases overload, impairs performance, and predisposes users to negative emotional reactions, especially when system features are overlapping, poorly structured, or do not contribute to the user's core goals (Tarafdar, Pullins & Ragu-Nathan 2015, 111; Ayyagari et al. 2011, 839–849).

System feature overload can also arise in situations where the features offered by the platform do not meet the actual needs of the users. Social media users use platforms for a wide variety of purposes, such as social interaction, entertainment, or information retrieval. At the same time, however, the features integrated into the platforms aim to serve all of these purposes

simultaneously. In such cases, users may quickly feel that the number of available functions exceeds their needs and impairs the usability of the system. (Thompson, Higgins & Howell 1991, 128-129; Gan 2024, 1124.) Studies have shown that feature overload can lead to user dissatisfaction, navigation difficulties, and the perception that the system is difficult to manage (Gan 2024, 1133).

In the context of social media, system feature overload is also linked to built-in structures that support seamless and uninterrupted use. Social media features such as “endless scroll” or “infinite scroll” and algorithmic content streams reduce so-called natural stopping points and make it more difficult to disconnect. At the same time, they increase exposure to a constant stream of stimuli. (Alter 2017, 149-153; Natarajan 2024, 1958.) According to Bhowmik (2025, 39), social media content streams resemble a continuous flow with no clear beginning or end. This can maintain a state in which users are exposed to constant information without experiencing any meaningful decision or outcome.

In addition, technological dependence can in itself increase cognitive load. Studies show that the mere presence of a smartphone can reduce an individual's available cognitive resources and thus make it more difficult to concentrate on other tasks (Ward, Duke, Gneezy & Bos 2017, 143; Stewart, Perren, Chambers & Zulauf 2024, 906). The constant presence of technology can thus create a situation where the user is exposed to multiple stimuli and activities at the same time, which increases cognitive load and makes it more difficult to control the technology (Ophir, Nass & Wagner 2009, 15583).

System feature overload shows that social media overload is not only caused by the amount of information or social obligations, but also by the technical structure and solutions of the platforms themselves. When users' existing resources are no longer sufficient to meet these technological, social, and informational demands, social media use can begin to manifest itself in situations where agency is weakened and the environment seems to control actions more than the users' own choices (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). In these moments, overload can turn into an experience of situational digital vulnerability, which will be examined in the next chapter.

4 Situational digital vulnerability

Although the concept of social media overload helps to comprehensively structure the accumulation of different demands (information, social, and system features) placed on an individual in social media environments, it is not enough to fill the knowledge gap on its own with the regard to why and how these demands become problematic for users. Overload accurately describes the cognitive strain associated with excessive amounts of stimuli, features, or requests, but it does not fully answer the question of when the user's ability to control their own actions begins to weaken (Kitchin & Dodge 2011, 13, 17). At this point, a conceptual perspective is needed that takes into account not only the amount of overload but also how the overload affects the user's ability to act purposefully in the digital environment.

In consumer research, this change from overload to vulnerability can be understood through the concept of consumer vulnerability, which has been defined as a situational state of powerlessness or reduced control that arises from asymmetries in the marketplace or exposure to marketing practices and products (Baker et al. 2005, 134). In this context, vulnerability is not seen as a permanent characteristic of specific groups, but more of as a situation that can emerge in particular circumstances when individuals' resources are insufficient to meet the demands or challenges of the environment. In such situations, individuals may become dependent on certain external factors or actors (e.g. platforms and market mechanisms). (Baker et al. 2005; Stewart et al. 2024.)

This study examines experiences of vulnerability arising from social media environments through the concept of *situational digital vulnerability*. The concept refers to situations and moments in which the use of media in a digital environment begins to appear vulnerable to the user, weakening the individual's experience of agency, control, and regulation of their own boundaries. In this context, vulnerability is not understood as a permanent characteristic of the individual or the environment, but rather as a situational state that arises from the interaction between the individual and the environment (Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020). In this study, this perspective is extended to the digital context by integrating the literature on consumer vulnerability with research on the platform economy and algorithmic media (Bucher 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018). This shifts the focus from the mere amount of overload toward a deeper understanding of how consumer vulnerability is constructed in algorithmically and commercially structured digital environments. In this way, the concept of situational digital vulnerability serves as a tool for analyzing experiences related to social media use from a new perspective. In the following subsections, the concept is

examined in more detail from the perspective of both the consumer research vulnerability debate and key phenomena related to social media use.

4.1 Towards the concept of situational digital vulnerability

Consumer vulnerability has long been a central but multidimensional term and concept within marketing and consumer behavior research. The term has been widely used to describe various kinds of challenging or disadvantageous situations in which consumers may find themselves. (Hill & Sharma 2020, 551.) In early interpretations, vulnerability was understood primarily as a condition linked to an individual's permanent characteristics, such as age, health, economic resources, disabilities, or lack of knowledge, which weakened their ability to protect themselves from commercial influences (e.g. Andreasen 1993; Ringold 1995). In this view, vulnerability was understood as a characteristic of certain groups and was often seen as a demographic classification issue, with certain consumer groups considered to be inherently more susceptible to risks than others (Baker et al. 2005, 128-130).

Since then, marketing research has gradually moved away from this group-centered way of perceiving vulnerability. Later literature emphasizes vulnerability more as a dynamic state that is activated depending on the situation and context, arising from the interaction between environmental factors and the individual's cognitive, emotional, and self-regulatory resources. (Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020.) This redefinition emphasizes that vulnerability is not a permanent or inherent characteristic of an individual, but varies according to the situation and context. Current research also emphasizes that vulnerability is not solely due to individual shortcomings, but is often produced and reinforced by marketing practices, institutional structures, and socio-technical systems. (Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020; Stewart et al. 2024.) Table 1 brings these different perspectives together, presenting the key conceptualizations of consumer vulnerability found in the literature on marketing and consumer research.

Table 1. Key conceptualizations of consumer vulnerability in the literature on marketing and consumer research

Conceptualization	Core view of vulnerability	Primary drivers	Level of analysis	Key references
Trait-based (demographic / dispositional)	Vulnerability as a relatively stable characteristic linked to individual traits or group membership	Age, income, education, health, cognitive ability, literacy	Individual / segment	Andreassen (1993); Ringold (1995); Smith & Cooper-Martin (1997); Hill (1995; 2001)
Situational (state-based)	Vulnerability as a temporary state triggered by specific conditions	Life-events, stress, emotional states, cognitive load, crises	Individual-in-context	Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg (2005); Commuri & Ekici (2008)
Interactional (consumer-market-interface)	Vulnerability arising from between consumer resources and marketplace demands	Information asymmetry, persuasion, complexity, limited consumer knowledge	Consumer – Market interaction	Baker et al. (2005); John (1999); Mukhopadhyay & Johar (2005); Chaplin & John (2010)
Structural (systemic / institutional)	Vulnerability as produced and reinforced by market systems and institutional structures	Inequality, regulation gaps, market practices, platform logics	Meso / macro (market, institutional)	Hill & Sharma (2020); Giesler & Veresiu (2014); Viswanathan et al. (2010); Shultz & Holbrook (2009)
Processual (dynamic / longitudinal)	Vulnerability as a fluid, evolving process over time	Accumulation of disadvantages, feedback loops, coping failures	Temporal / cross-level	Baker et al. (2005); Hill & Sharma (2020); Mende et al. (2024)
Marketplace-mediated (digital / socio-technical)	Vulnerability as amplified by data-driven and digitally mediated environments	Personalization, targeting, dark patterns, attention capture	Socio-technical systems	Lambrecht & Tucker (2019); Stewart et al. (2024)
Transformative (well-being oriented)	Vulnerability as a condition that can be alleviated through empowerment, policy, and support systems	Consumer literacy, interventions, regulation, well-being initiatives	Multi-level	Hill (2001); Mick (2006); Ozanne & Anderson (2010)

Although the concept of situational digital vulnerability has not yet been established as a separate concept in the scientific field, it can be seen as being directly based on two strongly developed lines of research. Firstly, the concept draws on consumer vulnerability literature, where vulnerability is understood and treated as a situational and dynamic state rather than a permanent characteristic of consumers (e.g. Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020; Basu, Kumar & Kumar 2023). Secondly, the concept is linked to research on digital vulnerability, which has examined the position of consumers in algorithmically mediated, data-driven, and commercially driven digital environments. This research tradition has particularly emphasized how the technical structures of platforms, algorithmic curation, and personalization practices can limit consumers' agency, transparency, and opportunities to control their own exposure. (e.g. Bucher 2017; Zuboff 2019; Helberger et al. 2018; BEUC 2025.) By combining these two lines of thought, situational digital vulnerability provides a framework for understanding the vulnerability that arises when user experiences and the operating logic of digital platforms collide.

Marketing practices can further reinforce consumer vulnerability through various structural and interactive mechanisms. For example, manipulative, discriminatory, or otherwise exploitative marketing tactics can place consumers in situations where their ability to evaluate or resist commercial influence can be weakened. (Stewart et al. 2024, 910.) Hill and Sharma (2020, 6) state that consumers become vulnerable when their access to or control over key resources is restricted in

a way that impairs their ability to function effectively within the marketplace. It is also important to note that this does not only apply to financial or informational resources, but also to psychological and social factors such as identity-related pressures, emotional well-being, and the need to belong (Baker et al. 2005, 134–135). As indicated by McKeage and colleagues (2018), social norms and structural inequalities can also play a role in making consumers vulnerable since they can affect how individuals are treated and how they feel about themselves within a specific market environment.

Also, one of the key conceptual tensions in vulnerability research relates to who defines vulnerability: the consumer themselves or external observers. Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997) distinguish between actual vulnerability, which is experienced and expressed by the individual, and perceived vulnerability, which is often attributed to consumers by others on the basis of incorrect assumptions. Baker et al. (2005, 128–129) state that perceived vulnerability can be understood as a misinterpretation in which an individual's vulnerability is defined from the outside by projecting the perceptions and experiences of others onto them. It is for this reason that vulnerability research often emphasizes consumer-oriented approaches and consumer empowerment. According to this perspective, individuals are not vulnerable simply because there are structural problems in their environment; vulnerability becomes actualized when individuals feel that their resources, control, or coping mechanisms are insufficient in a given situation. (Wathieu et al. 2002; Labrecque, von dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak & Hofacker 2013.) In this research context, this experiential perspective is adopted, focusing on users' own experiences of agency, control, and difficulties in managing their use of social media.

Thus, in this research context, situational digital vulnerability can be conceptually constructed to refer to situational moments in which the demands imposed by social media begin to manifest themselves to users as a sense of diminished agency and control. However, this does not mean that the user is constantly vulnerable, as users rarely remain passive observers (Bandura 2001, 4; Koslow & Stewart 2022, 831; Tran & Chen 2024, 3305), which will also be discussed further in the section on coping in this work (see, Chapter 5). It is more a question of the relationship between the asymmetry created by the environment and the perceived lack of control. The following subsections take a closer look at the mechanisms through which such situations can arise in the context of social media.

4.2 Diminished agency and loss of control in social media

One of the key ways in which digital vulnerability can manifest itself in social media use is related to the user's experience of diminished agency and control. In the context of social media, diminished agency and loss of control refer to situations in which individuals feel they have less opportunity to control, regulate, or interrupt their social media behavior and actions. (Elhai, Dvorak, Levine & Hall 2017, 253; Turel 2021, 1; Sharma, Lee & Johnson 2022, 145.) According to Bandura (2001), agency can generally be understood as an individual's ability to act purposefully, make meaningful choices, or control their own actions in order to achieve personal goals. When agency is reduced, behavior is seen as less deliberate and more automatic, reactive, or externally controlled (LaRose et al. 2003, 228). This does not mean a complete absence of choice in digital environments but rather a perceived reduction in the individual's ability to influence when, how, and for how long they engage with the platform (LaRose 2010; Turel 2021).

Several researchers have identified the weakening of agency as one of the key risks of current social media environments. Lane et al. (2021, 191–192) highlight weakened control and agency in their assessment of the harmful aspects of modern social media. Similarly, Beer (2017, 4) states that in the era of the data economy, the division of agency between humans and algorithmic systems is one of the key social issues. Previous studies support this loss of experiential agency by showing that social media platforms are often designed in a way that reduces the need for conscious decision-making and promotes continuous engagement (Turel 2021). LaRose et al. (2003, 228) describe loss of control as a situation in which an individual continues a certain activity longer than originally intended or finds it difficult to stop the activity.

Several intertwined factors can influence social media use, and Du, Kerkhof, and van Koningsbruggen (2019) identify four key mechanisms that can gradually undermine users' sense of control. First, social media offers its users immediate gratification, such as social acceptance, entertainment, and the pleasure of interaction. Such immediate rewards can lead users to favor short-term satisfaction at the expense of longer-term goals (Du et al. 2019, 477). Second, social media use can gradually become a routine habit over time. Repeated use can lead to situations where stimuli associated with the platform (such as the app logo, a notification, or a familiar usage situation) trigger an almost automatic behavioral response without a conscious decision. (Du et al. 2019, 477–478.) Third, the ubiquitous nature of social media can reinforce the experience of being constantly connected. This can blur the line between online and offline activities and increase the

feeling that the user must be constantly available. (Vorderer et al. 2016; Du et al. 2019, 477–478.) Fourth, various notification systems can interrupt users' other activities and redirect their attention back to the platform. Notifications can not only disrupt concentration, but also increase social pressure to respond quickly, which can make it difficult to disconnect from the platform. (Du et al. 2019, 478.)

Together, these factors mentioned above can create situations where social media use may feel less like a conscious choice by the user and more like an activity that occurs at least partly automatically, or is guided by habits (LaRose et al. 2003, 228; Turel 2021, 2; Du et al. 2019, 477). In a marketing-saturated social media environment, the weakening of agency is also particularly relevant from the perspective of consumer research. When users feel that their control is weakening, their ability to evaluate, filter, and resist various commercial messages may also weaken (Friestad & Wright 1994, 3–5, 9; Baker et al. 2005, 134–136). Thus, weakened agency and control constitute a key mechanism through which the use of social media can, in certain situations, appear to users as digital vulnerability.

4.3 Incidental exposure and affective reactions

As discussed earlier in this work, users are exposed to a massive amount of information in the social media environment. Because social media information feeds are structured the way they are, users are also exposed to information that they are not looking for or do not necessarily want to see. This can be referred to as incidental information exposure. (Fletcher & Nielsen 2018, 2450-2454.) According to Lai (2023, 652), whereas selective exposure is based on the user's active efforts to seek information, incidental exposure occurs in social media streams without conscious choice. Thorson (2020, 1068) argues that when we shift to the mindset that users are not randomly exposed, but rather unintentionally exposed to various types of non-self-determined information, attention can be shifted toward the structural and technological challenges that these platforms entail. He notes that, at the same time, attention also shifts to platform companies, which increasingly determine what content users are exposed to and what they are not.

Lim, Waling, James, and Power (2025, 514) note that most of the literature on incidental exposure relates to news or political information (see, e.g., Fletcher & Nielsen 2018; Matthes et al. 2020). However, incidental exposure is not limited to these topics; but the same logic extends widely to other content, such as content related to appearance and the body, sexualized content,

misinformation, health content, and commercial messages that may be encountered as part of an algorithmically curated content stream (see, e.g. Rousseau & Rodgers 2025; Owens, Behun, Manning & Reid 2012; Mikell & Powell 2025; Tian & Robinson 2009; Humphrey, Laverie & Rinaldo 2017).

In addition to the burden of this constant flow of content, exposure to different types of content can trigger immediate emotional reactions – such as anxiety, fear, anger, or envy – without the user's conscious decision or consideration. In such cases, vulnerability manifests itself as an affective state in which emotions are quickly activated and begin to guide behavior before the user has a chance to pause for conscious reflection. (Zajonc 1980; Kahneman 2011; Slaby & von Scheve 2019.) Social media provides a particularly fertile environment for this kind of affective reactivity, as users are constantly exposed to other people's emotional expressions, crises, opinions, and provocative representations. People share news, statements, opinions, and other content that may evoke sudden and even surprising emotions. (Bright & Logan 2018, 1213–1215; Papacharissi 2015, 9, 32.) Research on emotional contagion shows that the emotional atmosphere in social networks can spread from one user to another and affect their own emotional states without conscious reflection (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock 2014, 8788–8790). At the same time, social comparison, which is a key part of social media use, has been linked to feelings of envy, inadequacy, and anxiety, which can reduce well-being and reinforce negative self-evaluation (Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy 2015, 139–141; Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles 2014, 206–207).

Affective responses are further reinforced by the fact that content streams on social media are continuous and algorithmically curated. Recent studies indicate that engagement-based algorithms emphasize emotionally charged content since they encourage reactions and increase usage time, even though users themselves report that such content diminishes their experience and increases negative feelings. (Milli, Carroll, Wang, Pandey, Zhao & Dragan 2025, 1–2; Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker & van Bavel 2017, 7313–7317.) Shabahang et al. (2023, 460) note that individuals also tend to lean more toward negative news than positive news, which has also been referred to as negativity bias.

When emotional stimuli are presented in rapid succession without a clear pause, the user's ability to self-regulate can be reduced: a strong emotional response can override judgment and lead to impulsive behavior, such as continued scrolling, reactive commenting, or rapid mood swings. In

this sense, affective reactivity is a key mechanism through which social media use can become harmful even before conscious evaluation or reflection. (Turel & Bechara 2016; 1–2.)

4.4 Social pressure and difficulty of disengaging from social media

Du et al. (2019, 477–478) mentioned the ubiquity of social media as one cause of weakened control. Chen, Sun, Zhang, and Yao (2024, 457) argued that social media has become a necessity not only in everyday life, but also in other areas of life, such as work. As a consequence, the lines between online and offline have become blurred, and the use of social media has become seamlessly integrated into people's daily routines and activities (Vorderer et al. 2016). Even if one might want to change how one uses social media or take a more critical stance toward it, one cannot completely ignore its social dimension.

In the context of social media, it is not just a matter of receiving information but also of socialization, which is why social media is not used in a social vacuum but is linked to expectations and shared group norms that guide when and how individuals are expected to participate (Tran & Chen 2024, 3304; Vorderer et al. 2018, 694–695). van Dijck (2013, 16–17) notes that social media platforms have undeniably changed the nature of private and public communication permanently. Today, social media platforms serve as key venues for interaction, helping to maintain and nurture social relationships (Mahmud, Wen, Fern, Ling & Ramayah 2025, 5; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2011, 873–877). Angelini and colleagues (2024, 2) state that compliance with peer norms has a strong influence on the behavior of young people in particular, and that they are also more inclined to engage in online behavior that their friends consider normal and valuable. As a result, disengaging from social media is often not very simple for an individual, but involves a variety of social concerns.

One of these concerns manifests itself as the fear of exclusion, whereby individuals fear or worry that they will miss out on a significant event, interaction, or piece of information. This phenomenon has been conceptualized in particular through the concept of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which has been shown to reinforce continuous social media use even in situations where users recognize the negative effects of use on their own well-being. (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan & Gladwell 2013, 1841; Dhir et al. 2018, 143.) According to Tandon, Dhir, Talwar, Kaur & Mäntymäki (2021, 3), FoMO is one of the reasons that can cause users to stay constantly online and connected.

This phenomenon highlights a key dimension of situational digital vulnerability: the tension between individual well-being and socially constructed expectations. Even if users recognize the need to limit their own social media use, their ability to do so may be limited by social obligations and fear of exclusion (Baumeister & Leary 1995, 520–521; Przybylski et al. 2013, 1842–1843). This highlights the social nature of social media. From this perspective, vulnerability arises not only from the technical structures of platforms or information flows, but also from social norms and new interaction practices that make it difficult to disengage. (Hall & Baym 2012, 317; Vorderer et al. 2016, 695–697.)

4.5 Compulsive engagement and platform design

Compulsive use of social media has often been viewed as a result of an individual's weakened self-regulation, addictive tendencies, or personal choices (see, e.g. LaRose 2003; Andreassen 2015; Du et al. 2019). In such interpretations, responsibility for behavior that feels burdensome or addictive lies primarily with the user themselves. However, Tarafdar, D'Arcy, Turel & Gupta (2015) challenge this view by stating that, according to previous studies, stress or overload reduces social media use, and users are therefore not assumed to be addicted to technology. This is a very complex situation, as users may experience stress or strain but at the same time continue to use social media compulsively despite various health and mental health risks (Tarafdar et al. 2015, 68; Bawden & Robinson 2009; 183).

According to Rixen and colleagues (2023, 1), each social media platform has its own set of unique features. But, one feature that is integrated into almost all major social media platforms is the so-called 'Infinite Scroll' feature (Rixen et al. 2023, 2). According to Meinhardt et al. (2025, 1), Infinite Scrolling is a feature designed for long-term engagement, where content loads automatically and endlessly as the user swipes or scrolls the screen. Gan (2024) compares this feature to the flow experience, which was originally introduced in psychology by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). In the context of social media, the flow experience can be described as a state in which the user is completely immersed in an activity. The flow experience can also cause users to engage in situations that seem very pleasant and enjoyable, even at great cost. (Gan 2024, 1125.) Meinhardt et al. (2025, 2), on the other hand, describe the phenomenon using the term "trance," which leads to such deep concentration that it is difficult to break effectively.

Turel (2021, 2) states in his article that, according to studies, people are generally surprised at how little control they have over their social media use or how much they use it. He also emphasizes that regardless of a person's cognitive reflection skills, they may find themselves in a situation where they do not have as much control over their social media use as they originally thought. Social media features such as infinite scrolling can cause various negative feelings (Meinhardt et al. 2025, 1–2). According to Han (2018, 123), studies have shown that users are concerned that they are missing out on opportunities to enjoy real life because of the time they spend on social media. Lane et al. (2021, 192) agree, stating that one of the most significant problems with social media is that the time spent on content takes away from our real life, which we could use, for example, to build and maintain relationships. According to Rixen et al. (2023, 2), infinite scrolling is one of the features of social media that has been shown to lead to the most regret when reflecting on its use.

In addition to engaging content, social media platforms are designed to reinforce social interaction. According to Naga and Ebarido (2025, 2), social media likes, comments, and other social feedback mechanisms provide users with immediate social reinforcement, which in turn encourages them to return to the platform again and again. They add that engagement is further increased by various stimulating factors related to, for example, social relationships, entertainment, and information seeking. According to Fox and Moreland (2015, 169–170), although social media allows us to be seamlessly connected to others, it can also create compulsive use or a constant search for social pleasure.

On the one hand, social media sites are designed to engage users to the extent that they will continue to return to these sites (Alter 2017). However, users are not completely at the mercy of these processes. Where excessive use is beginning to impact life in some way, for example, through difficulties with time management or unpleasant emotional states, such a realization can lead to consciously regulating usage and attempting to regain control over one's own behavior (Bandura 2001). This implies a move from relatively automatic external control to more self-directed behavior – strengthening and gaining back one's control and agency. The next chapter will look at these processes more in detail through the idea of coping and digital self-regulation with regard to social media.

5 Coping and digital self-regulation in social media

The previous chapters examined how the use of social media in a marketing-saturated environment can lead to overload (information, social, and system feature) and situational digital vulnerability, which manifests itself in, among other things, diminished agency, affective reactivity, and social pressure, and compulsive use. However, users do not simply accept these effects without response but instead take various actions to control or mitigate stressful experiences (Bandura 2001, 4; Koslow & Stewart 2022, 831; Tran & Chen 2024, 3305). This active behavior has also been examined in consumer behavior research through the concept of consumer empowerment, which refers to a dynamic process in which individuals seek to increase their agency and influence existing power relations through their own actions (Labrecque et al. 2013, 258). This chapter examines these efforts as means of coping and digital self-regulation in social media environment.

Coping has traditionally been defined as an individual's cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, adapt to, or tolerate various stressful or demanding situations, demands, or emotions. Thus, coping does not refer to a permanent skill or characteristic, but rather to a process that is activated when the demands of the environment exceed the resources available to the individual. (Lazarus & Folkman 1984.) Coping in digital environments takes on special characteristics, as social media is a constantly present, rapidly changing environment that contains social expectations and norms, and in which users have limited opportunities to control their exposure (Vorderer et al. 2016; Cao & Sun 2018; Naga & Ebarido 2025; Stevic 2024). In this context, coping is not directed at a single or clearly defined stressor, but rather at a complex and recurring experience (e.g., information flows, social expectations, and the technical structure of the platform, which were discussed in previous chapters). Cao and Sun (2018, 11) note that individual internal processes are also complex in this context. Coping is not based solely on external stressors, but on how individuals assess their own individual situation in relation to their available resources. Therefore, the nature of stressful experiences and the coping strategies associated with them are strongly individual and context-dependent, meaning that the same social media features may appear manageable to one person and overwhelming to another. (Lin, Lin, Luo & Liu 2021, 2; Mahmud et al. 2025, 10.)

Self-regulation, on the other hand, has traditionally been traditionally defined as the processes by which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relation to their personal goals and standards (Bandura 1991; Carver & Scheier 1998). Unlike coping, which is often activated in situations where environmental demands exceed the resources

available to the individual, self-regulation refers to the continuous and goal-oriented control of behavior across individual situations (Carver & Scheier 1998, 12–15; Baumeister & Vohs 2007, 115–117). Self-regulation can therefore also have a preventive effect: individuals strive to direct their attention, efforts, and actions before stress or vulnerability becomes acute (Gross 1998, 275–277). Digital self-regulation refers to the ability to monitor one's own use, recognize attempts to influence, and adapt one's own actions in relation to both personal goals and the opportunities offered – and limited – by the platform (LaRose et al. 2003; Turel & Qahri-Saremi 2016; Büchi, Festic & Latzer 2019a). In this way, self-regulation is directly linked to the negotiation of agency in a commercially structured digital environment.

In consumer research and marketing, coping is not only an individual psychological stress management mechanism, but can also be understood as a consumer's strategic response to commercial influence and marketing pressure (Friestad & Wright 1994; Campbell & Kirmani 2000; Labrecque et al. 2013). According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), consumers develop knowledge and understanding of marketers' tactics over time and use this knowledge to protect their autonomy. In this case, coping and self-regulation manifest themselves as concrete strategies that consumers use to control their exposure, critically interpret attempts to influence them, and limit commercial overload. (Friestad & Wright 1994, 1–3, 5–7.) One of the most important and widely studied strategies of this kind is advertising avoidance, which is discussed in the following subsection.

5.1 Digital advertising avoidance and resistance

Advertising avoidance is one of the most visible ways in which consumers seek to control commercial overload. According to Speck and Elliott (1997, 61), ad avoidance refers to all actions taken by media users to reduce their exposure to advertising content. In a digital context, advertising avoidance is defined more broadly as an action that reduces exposure to digital advertising or "turns it off" (Kelly, Kerr & Drennan 2010, 17-18; Çelik, Çam & Koseoglu 2022, 2). Thus, ad avoidance does not refer merely to a lack of attention, but rather to an active effort to control one's exposure to commercial messages (Cho & Cheon 2004, 90–92).

From the consumer's point of view, avoiding advertising is part of a broader learning process. According to Friestad and Wright (1994, 1), over time consumers develop personal knowledge about attempts to persuade them and the tactics and motives used in these attempts. In this way,

consumers learn to recognize how, when, and why marketers try to influence them. This knowledge, in turn, helps them to respond flexibly to these attempts in accordance with their own goals (Friestad & Wright 1994, 1). Campbell and Kirmani (2000, 69) specify that persuasion knowledge consists of consumers' beliefs about marketers' motives, strategies, and tactics, as well as the means by which these can be countered. When individuals recognize that they are being influenced, they can try to control the situation in line with their own goals and objectives (Campbell & Kirmani 2000, 69).

Empirical research shows that ad avoidance online is often active and intentional (Kelly, Kerr & Drennan 2010). Kelly, Kerr, Drennan, and Fazal-E-Hasan (2021, 343) assert that ad avoidance is likely one of the biggest challenges facing marketers today, and it has even been estimated that up to one-third of online page views might be blocked. In social media users can quickly scroll past sponsored content, close pop-up windows, or click away in-app advertisements (Guo et al. 2020, 2–3; Çelik et al. 2022, 2073). These can be seen as strategies for avoiding information that are often employed before more radical responses, such as suspending or terminating the use of a service or app (Speck & Elliott 1997, 63–65, Çelik et al. 2022, 2074).

In the context of social media, however, ad avoidance takes on a particularly complex nature. Unlike traditional media, where ads appear in clearly defined commercial breaks or slots, commercial content on social media is decentralized and blended into the rest of the content stream. Advertisements can be embedded in sponsored posts, influencer content, or even updates shared by acquaintances and friends. (Boerman, 2020, 199–200; Evans et al., 2017, 139–141.) According to Boerman (2020, 199–200), the problem with influencer marketing and native advertising is precisely that commercial communication resembles non-commercial content, which is why attempts at influence are not always recognized as advertising. This blurring of boundaries makes it thus more difficult to recognize persuasion and can delay or prevent the activation of coping strategies.

It is precisely this characteristic of the social media environment that can link avoidance of advertising closely to resistance; according to Baek and Morimoto (2012, 61), resistance can be understood as an outcome, a process, or a motivation. As an outcome, it can mean a lack of change in attitude or even a shift in the direction opposite to that intended by the message. As a process, resistance is built through affective (“I don’t like this”), cognitive (“I don’t believe this”), and behavioral (“I don’t act on this”) reactions. As motivation, it reflects an effort to protect one’s

autonomy from unwanted influence. Advertising avoidance particularly manifests the behavioral dimension of resistance: actively limiting exposure is a concrete way of rejecting attempts to influence. (Baek & Morimoto 2012, 62.)

In the social media environment, however, resistance is not always limited to simply skipping individual advertisements. When commercial content is perceived as continuous, difficult to identify, or intrusive, skipping individual advertisements may not be enough to restore the consumer's sense of control. In such cases, coping strategies may expand to include platform-wide solutions, such as limiting usage time, avoiding certain content, or even reducing or discontinuing use of the service. (Cho & Cheon 2004; Büchi et al. 2019b.) The following subsection examines how this negotiation can lead to more far-reaching strategies, such as withdrawing from social media and digital disengagement.

5.2 Withdrawal and disconnection

One of the key ways in which users try to cope with the overwhelming and stressful aspects of social media is by setting boundaries and withdrawing to varying degrees (Zerres & Breyer-Mayländer 2025, 380). Previous research suggests that the overload, technostress, and exhaustion associated with social media use activate users' efforts to change their own behavior and reduce their exposure to environments they find stressful (Beaudry & Pinsonneault 2005; Luqman et al. 2017; Maier et al. 2015). In such situations, coping is primarily focused on social media use itself: users seek to reduce their social media use or limit it in terms of time, content, or situation (Wolfers & Utz 2022). In their study, Lin et al. (2021, 3) identified four different forms of discontinuing use: (1) reducing social media use, (2) temporary discontinuation, (3) permanent withdrawal, and (4) switching to an alternative social media service.

Such strategies mentioned above may include, for example, taking breaks, deleting or hiding applications, or turning off notifications. These strategies aim to create distance from an environment that is momentarily perceived as too stressful, thereby restoring emotional balance and minimizing negative effects. (Bossio & Holton 2021, 2479; Mahmud et al. 2025, 10; Cao & Sun 2018, 10.) According to Lane et al. (2021, 197), the goal of reducing social media use or temporarily disconnecting is often to reconnect with one's real environment and people and develop a healthier relationship with technology. They also add that longer periods of disengagement are usually referred to as "digital detoxes", where user takes a "holiday" from the always-on social

media environment and connects back with their real-life environments. Suspending or disconnecting from use also allows users to respond to the demands of constant availability and the structural limitations of platforms. In this way, interruption can serve as a means of increasing the user's sense of control. (Bossio & Holton 2021, 2480.)

According to Luqman et al. (2017, 548), if the perceived negative effects and psychological strain of social media exceed a certain threshold for the user, the user may be motivated to stop using that particular social media platform altogether. According to Merlici et al. (2025, 2447), users may also replace the platform they use with another platform that exposes them to less information. However, Maier et al. (2015, 276) emphasize that even if a user theoretically decides to stop using social media or switch platforms, in practice this is not so simple and involves certain costs (e.g., social and emotional) that make it difficult to break away.

It should also be noted that complete disengagement is not always necessary for well-being. Turel (2021, 2) suggests that simply regaining a sense of control – regardless of whether the user stops using the platform altogether – can mitigate negative effects. In this sense, withdrawal and disengagement do not mean unequivocal rejection, but rather a renegotiation of the relationship with the platform (Wolfers & Untz 2022). It is precisely this restoration of the experience of control that opens up the perspective of digital self-regulation. Shaping one's relationship with social media does not always mean distancing oneself, but can also take the form of strengthening one's agency within the platform.

5.3 Digital self-regulation as platform management

Digital self-regulation refers to processes in which individuals monitor, evaluate, and guide their own actions with respect to their own goals and the opportunities offered and limited by the platform (Carver & Scheier 1998; Bandura 1991; LaRose et al. 2003). Unlike coping behavior, which is typically activated in situations of stress (Lazarus & Folkman 1984), digital self-regulation is a more continuous and proactive process. It is based on the premise that the environment is at least partially controllable. Situations perceived by an individual as risky but controllable are more likely to lead to control-oriented strategies than withdrawal (Mahdmud et al. 2025, 9–10). Such strategies can reinforce perceived control and agency, especially when users are aware of the tools available to them (Turel 2021, 5).

In practice, digital self-regulation can manifest itself, for example, in limiting usage time, adjusting notification settings, curating content flow, managing visibility, and filtering communication channels (Luqman et al. 2017, 552; Büchi et al. 2019a, 2). Eli-Dit-Cosaque and Straub (2011, 594) emphasize that the more the users perceive the system as controllable, the more user engagement increases and the more meaningful it is for users to use it. Self-regulation can thus serve as a means of maintaining participation without the user feeling that they are losing control.

However, digital self-regulation also requires an understanding of the platform's operating logic. Algorithmic curation modifies content based on the user's previous activity, making regulation reflexive: users must evaluate not only their own actions but also how the platform responds to them (Nagy & Neff 2015, 6; Ruckenstein & Granroth 2020). This makes self-regulation cognitively demanding. It is not just a matter of adjusting technical settings, but of consciously managing relationships in an environment whose primary goal is to maximize engagement and attention (Turel & Qahri-Saremi 2016; van Dijck et al. 2018). Thus, individual agency always takes place within the framework of an algorithmically structured and commercially driven infrastructure.

Although digital self-regulation can strengthen perceived agency and well-being, its success is not self-evident. It requires time, motivation, and digital competencies that not all users possess equally (Büchi et al. 2019a). In addition, the structural features of the platform – such as constant notifications, personalized recommendations, and social interaction norms – can undermine the maintenance of long-term regulation (Turel & Qahri-Saremi 2016). Thus, self-regulation can be understood as taking place within the framework of structural conditions.

5.4 Cognitive and emotional coping

However, not all responses to the burdensome nature or vulnerability of social media manifest themselves as visible changes in behavior or adjustments to platform settings. Some coping takes place in an individual's internal interpretation processes and emotional regulation. In this case, the focus of regulation is not the platform or one's own actions, but rather the way in which the situation is understood and experienced. (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, 141–143; Gross 1998, 275–277.) According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) classic classification, coping can be directed either at the problem or at the emotion. According to them, when environmental structures cannot

be easily changed, individuals resort to emotional and cognitive strategies aimed at mitigating the psychological effects of stress or feelings of vulnerability.

In a digital environment, this may mean, for example, reinterpreting the situation, reinforcing skepticism, normalizing attempts to influence, or emotional distancing (Friestad & Wright 1994). According to Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model theory, consumers develop perceptions of marketers' motives and tactics over time and use this information to protect their own autonomy. In this case, coping can manifest itself as a critical reading: advertising is seen as an attempt to influence, not as neutral content. Campbell and Kirmani (2000, 72) emphasize that such persuasion knowledge may trigger evaluation processes that can reduce the effectiveness of the message without the user physically withdrawing from the situation.

On an emotional level, targeted advertising can elicit conflicting reactions. Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) show that user experiences can be structured along an axis of fear, irritation, and pleasure. Fear is associated with the feeling of being invisibly monitored and controlled; advertising serves as a sign that one's digital footprints are part of a larger data infrastructure. Irritation, on the other hand, arises in situations where algorithmic classification is perceived as incorrect, stereotypical, or simplistic. In such cases, cognitive coping may manifest itself as questioning the capabilities of algorithms or treating them with irony. At the same time, targeting can be pleasurable. When an algorithmic recommendation is perceived as relevant, the user may feel that they are being "seen" and understood. (Ruckenstein & Granroth 2020, 12-14.) This reflects the broader logic of the platform economy, in which the market "sees from within" the everyday life of the user and seeks to anticipate their needs (Fourcade & Healy 2017). In this sense, coping does not always mean resistance, but can also include acceptance and enjoyment of relevance.

From a dual-system perspective (Turel & Qahri-Saremi 2016), such situations can be understood and seen as tension between impulsive, affective reactivity and reflective evaluation. An advertisement may activate immediate, impulsive interest or pleasure (System 1), but at the same time trigger critical evaluative thinking about the data collection or commercial motives (System 2). Cognitive-emotional coping is at work in this tension between desire, suspicion, and rational evaluation. According to Michael and Lupton (2016), this can be described as "oscillatory awareness," in which anxiety and everyday usefulness alternate.

In such situations, users may resort to emotion-focused coping strategies in particular. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the goal of emotion-focused coping is to regulate one's own emotions and restore or maintain experiential balance in situations where the environment cannot be directly changed. According to them, the object of regulation is not the external stimulus, but one's own reaction to it. Eli-Dit-Cosaque and Straub (2011, 495) describe such strategies as, among other things, redefining the situation, downplaying or ignoring negative aspects, maintaining optimism, comparing the situation to one's own, and passive acceptance. In this case, the user does not seek to eliminate the influence, but rather to modify their own attitude towards it in order to maintain a sense of agency.

However, the literature also reveals contradictions regarding the regulation of social media use and emotions, as social media itself may also be used as a form of coping (Wolfers & Schneider 2021). In such cases, social media is utilized for example to regulate negative emotions experienced in one's own life and can serve as a so-called escape mechanism (Beaudry & Pinsonneault 2005, 495). As noted by Stenseng, Skaug Stokke, Selin Şahin and Zübeyir Kaya (2025, 623–624) in their research, social media can serve as a means of “escaping from reality” or daily routines, which can both alleviate momentary stress and simultaneously perpetuate a cycle of use. Thus, in terms of coping, the role of social media is twofold: it can serve as a tool for self-regulation or as a factor that, in turn, can hinder long-term control over social media use. Towards the end of this chapter, Table 2 below summarizes the most important research streams related to coping and digital self-regulation in the context of this study.

Table 2. Coping and Digital Self-Regulation in Marketing-Saturated Social Media: Key Research Streams

Research Stream	Theoretical Lens	Primary Focus	Level of Regulation	Typical Strategies Identified	Key References	Identified Limitations
Advertising Avoidance	Media avoidance theory; persuasion research	Reducing exposure to advertising	Behavioral	Skipping, scrolling past, blocking, closing pop-ups	Speck & Elliott (1997); Kelly et al. (2020); Baek & Morimoto (2012)	Emphasis on observable avoidance; limited attention to internal interpretation
Consumer Resistance	Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM); resistance theory	Protecting autonomy from commercial influence	Cognitive & Behavioral	Skepticism, counter-arguing, message derogation	Friestad & Wright (1994); Campbell & Kirmani (2000)	Often assumes clear recognition of persuasion; less focus on algorithmic opacity
Platform Withdrawal & Disengagement	Technostress; overload; discontinuance models	Reducing or terminating platform use	Behavioral	Temporary breaks, digital detox, switching platforms	Luqman et al. (2017); Lin et al. (2021); Maier et al. (2015)	Focus on exit rather than regulation within platforms
Digital Self-Regulation (Within-Platform Management)	Self-regulation theory; dual-system theory	Managing use without leaving platform	Strategic / Behavioral	Time limits, notification control, feed curation, visibility settings	Carver & Scheier (1998); Bandura (1991); Turel (2021); Büchi et al. (2019); Turel & Qahri-Saremi (2016)	Assumes perceived controllability; under-theorizes affective ambivalence
Cognitive & Emotional Coping	Coping theory; affect theory; algorithmic experience studies	Regulating internal responses to commercial and algorithmic environments	Internal (Cognitive & Emotional)	Reframing, normalization, distancing, acceptance, emotional regulation	Lazarus & Folkman (1984); Eli-Dit-Cosaque & Straub (2011); Ruckenstein & Granroth (2020); Michael & Lupton (2016)	Less integrated into marketing literature; rarely linked to commercial vulnerability

5.5 Theoretical framework

The literature presented above shows that the current operating logic of social media is strongly linked to commercial and algorithmic structures, in which attention and data constitute key economic resources (van Dijck 2013; Zuboff 2019). In this marketing-saturated environment, users are exposed to a constant load generated by information, social expectations, and system characteristics, which has been structured in the literature as dimensions of information overload, social overload, and system overload (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Yu et al. 2018; Whelan et al. 2020).

Based on this theoretical examination, it can be assumed that social media overload is not merely a technical or quantitative phenomenon, but in certain situations it can manifest itself as experiential and situational digital vulnerability for the user, consistent with research on vulnerability conceptualizing it as situational and context-dependent state (Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020). This vulnerability may manifest itself as a diminished sense of agency, a loss of control,

affective reactions, social pressure and difficulty disengaging from social media and compulsive engagement (Baker et al. 2005; Labrecque et al. 2013). Literature on coping and self-regulation suggests that individuals do not remain passive in the face of these experiences, but rather seek to regulate their relationship with the digital environment through various strategies (Bandura 2001; Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Coping and self-regulation strategies can be directed at the platform itself, one's own use or self, or commercial messages, and they help thus to shape future exposure and engagement with the platform (Bandura 2001; Labrecque et al. 2013).

Based on these theoretical starting points, the study outlines the following preliminary framework (see, Figure 2), in which the marketing-saturated social media environment acts as a structural context that exposes users easily to overload. This overload, in turn, can manifest itself as situational digital vulnerability, to which users respond with different kinds of coping and self-regulation strategies. These strategies, in turn, shape the user's future engagement and exposure to the platform environment.

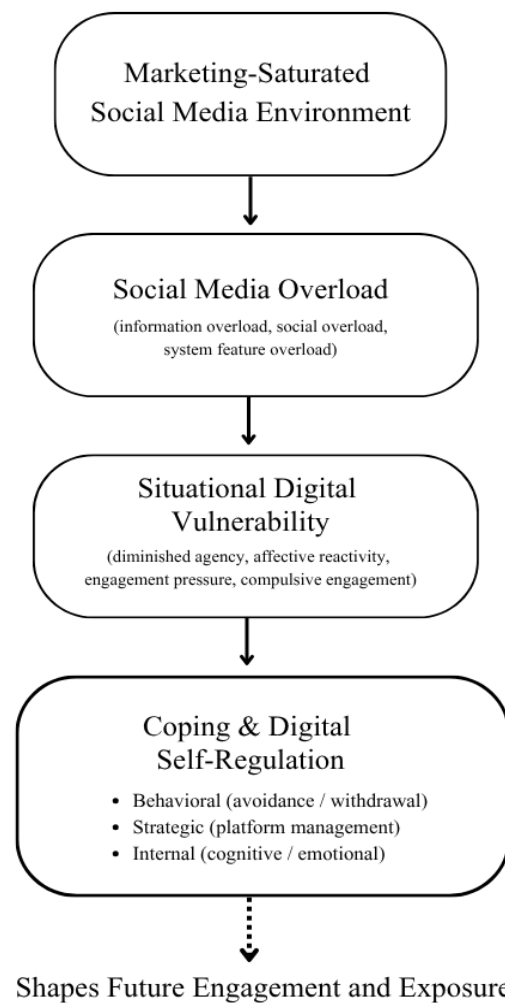


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: From Marketing Saturation to Digital Vulnerability and Coping

The framework illustrates how a marketing-saturated social media environment shapes and influences experiences of social media overload, and how these, in turn, can transform into situational digital vulnerability. In response to these experiences, young adults employ various coping and self-regulation strategies as they strive to manage their own social media use and maintain a sense of control. Rather than leading to permanent outcomes, these processes appear to be continuous, dynamic, and context-dependent. The framework thus emphasizes the situational and changing nature of social media use, as well as how experiences of vulnerability and their regulation are constructed in everyday digital environments and experiences.

6 Research methodology

Despite a growing body of quantitative research, especially within psychology and information system sciences, that has provided significant insights into the structural dimensions of social media overload through survey-based research and scale-development approaches (e.g. Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2016; Whelan et al. 2020), there remains limited understanding of how these dynamics are experienced, interpreted, and navigated in individuals' everyday lives. To understand young people's experiences of social media more deeply, it is essential to look beyond usage statistics and survey responses. The phenomenon is deeply rooted in individuals' lived experiences, perceptions, and emotions. Such subjective accounts can illuminate aspects that remain less visible in quantitative analyses, and can even lead to entirely new meanings and insights being found. (Creswell & Poth 2023, 4-7; Flick 2025, 7-8.)

This chapter will explain the various methodological choices made for this study and the reasons behind them. The chapter presents the research approach, data collection method, sampling strategy, and analysis method, and examines these choices in relation to the research objectives and research questions. These methodological decisions are not only discussed in terms of appropriateness, but also in relation to credibility, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility. The aim is to demonstrate how the used methods enable an in-depth and context-specific examination of experiences related to social media overload, situational vulnerability, and coping practices.

6.1 Research philosophy and approach

This study is based on a qualitative research approach, which is particularly suitable for examining phenomena that cannot be separated from their social and technological context or reduced to individual measurable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2024, 5–7; Flick 2022, 17–20). According to Flick (2022, 6), many social and technological phenomena are too complex and context-dependent to be understood as separate or simple cause-and-effect relationships. Flick (2022) also notes that if empirical research were based solely on modeling such relationships, a large part of the multidimensional phenomena of reality would inevitably be left out of the research.

Social media overload and situational digital vulnerability are not manifested solely in terms of usage volumes or individual behavioral patterns, but rather as experiential processes that are clearly intertwined with emotions, experiences of agency, and everyday situations involving technology.

Understanding these phenomena requires access to how individuals themselves describe, interpret, and give meaning to their own relationship with social media. As Silverman (2021, 55) notes, the strength of qualitative research lies not in producing an objective picture of reality, but in opening up access to the meanings that people attach to their experiences and the world around them.

As we saw in the theory section, the effects of social media platforms and algorithms are not primarily perceived by users as technical processes, but rather as everyday experiences, feelings, and affective reactions. Therefore, studying them requires an approach that is also capable of capturing experiential and emotional information – human nature of the phenomena. Kennedy (2018, 23) emphasizes that in order for individuals to recognize and strengthen their agency in relation to data and algorithms, they need “a vocabulary of emotions that can be used to explore everyday experiences of data” (see, Ruckenstein 2023, 38). This view supports an interpretive and qualitative approach, in which quality enables the emergence of experiences and meanings that cannot be captured by quantitative measures.

In addition, qualitative research enables us to examine how and why phenomena appear in a certain way, especially when dealing with experiential, multidimensional, and partly unstructured phenomena (Kara, 2022, 2–6; Creswell & Poth, 2024, p.). This study focuses on young consumers' subjective experiences of social media overload, situational digital vulnerability, and related coping and self-regulation strategies, which is why a qualitative approach is methodologically justified. According to Hirschman (1986, 238), marketing is considered a socially constructed discipline that requires humanistic research methods. This research is guided by interpretive epistemology, in which reality is understood as socially constructed and context dependent. In this conception of knowledge, knowledge is not a phenomenon that is separate from the researcher or objectively measurable but rather arises from the interaction between the researcher and the research subjects (Creswell & Poth 2024, 16–23).

The approach is inductive and exploratory in nature, but the research process has also been guided by iterative and abductive logic, in which theoretical understanding and empirical data have been in constant dialogue (Dubois & Gadde 2002). The analysis has not therefore proceeded in a linear fashion from theory to empirical data, but has instead involved a back-and-forth process in which preliminary theoretical concepts have guided the examination of the data, and observations drawn from the data have in turn helped to refine and reshape theoretical understanding. This approach enables the identification of new observations and conceptual connections, particularly when the

phenomenon under study is complex in nature and, to some extent, still theoretically unstructured (Patton 2015, 48; Stebbins 2001, 2-3, 6).

The chosen methodological solutions are closely linked to the research questions. The first research question requires data that allows young consumers' experiences of social media overload to be described from their own perspective. The second research question relies on participants' accounts of situations in which overload is structured as perceived vulnerability, weakened agency, and affective reactions. The third research question, in turn, requires an understanding of coping and self-regulation strategies as everyday, often negotiated, chancing or moving practices. A qualitative and interpretative approach provides a methodologically appropriate framework for this purpose.

6.2 Research design

While the previous section outlined the epistemological and methodological foundations of the study, this section describes how these principles were translated into concrete research design choices. In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method because the aim of the study is to understand young consumers' subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations related to the social media environment. As the phenomena under investigation are complex, ambiguous, and experiential, a method that allows for in-depth and flexible exploration from the individual's own perspective is needed to gain a deeper understanding (Rubin & Rubin 2005, 19; Stebbins 2001, 6).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, 3) emphasize that the goal of qualitative research interviews is to "step into the shoes" of the research subjects and understand the meanings they themselves attach to their experiences, before scientific explanations. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to this purpose, as it combines predefined themes and a research focus while maintaining a flexible, conversational format in which interviewees have the space to describe their experiences in their own words and also bring up unexpected perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, 31–32). According to Silverman (2021, 55), even if the interview situation is interactive and structured, it can still be used to obtain information that tells us something about our broader social reality.

The use of in-depth interviews is also justified because the study does not aim to map the prevalence or frequency of any phenomenon, but rather to produce an in-depth understanding of how and why the use of social media is perceived as burdensome and vulnerable on an everyday

level. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2017, 3) define in-depth interviews as a method in which, as the name suggests, it is possible to obtain more in-depth information about the phenomenon being studied through discussion. In-depth interviews can be described according to at least the following characteristics: they are conducted as individual interviews, they use open-ended questions and inductive questioning to achieve depth, and finally, they resemble a conversation (Guest et al. 2017, 3–4). This approach allows the interviewees' experiences, reasoning, and even conflicting emotions to emerge in a way that would not be possible with structured questionnaires.

6.2.1 Selection of research subjects

The study focuses on young adults aged 18–30, as this age group represents one of the most active and digitally connected user groups in the current social media environment (e.g., DataReportal 2025; Pew Research Center 2025). The lower limit of 18 ensures that participants are of legal age and can independently make well-informed decisions. The upper age limit of 30, in turn, clearly defines the target group as young adults before the onset of middle age.

The life stage of young adults of this age is often at the crossroads of education, transition to working life, and identity building, where social media serves as a key environment for social relationships, entertainment, and commercial influences. Although this generation is often described as “digital natives” (Prensky 2001, 2), their experiences are not limited to the platform-driven era. They have lived through a technological revolution and also experienced a time before the current social media landscape as we know it today. This dual experience makes their views particularly relevant to this study: they are able to compare different eras and reflect on how social media has changed everyday practices, interaction, and their own experience of agency.

In this study, the selection of participants was guided by the premise that consumer vulnerability is not a characteristic that can be defined from outside the researcher, but rather a phenomenon that is realized in the individual's own experiences and interpretations. Research on consumer vulnerability has long recognized a key tension between defining vulnerability from the perspective of researchers, institutions, or other external actors, or as a state experienced by consumers themselves. (Smith & Cooper-Martin 1997; Baker et al. 2005.) Baker et al. (2005) emphasize that consumers are genuinely vulnerable only when they themselves feel that they are in a vulnerable position. In these cases, vulnerability is not just an assumption based on theory, but a subjective and situational experience.

The study is also based on the assumption that the participants of the research are conscious actors who are capable of describing and structuring their own experiences, feelings, and actions in the context of social media. For this reason, the analysis places particular emphasis on the participants' own expressions and interpretations in the early stages of the research process. The researcher's task is not to fit the material into predefined theoretical categories, but to describe as faithfully as possible how young consumers themselves experience and interpret the burden of social media, their vulnerability, and their coping mechanisms. (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton 2012, 17.)

Screening questions were therefore used to select research subjects, with the aim of ensuring that those participating in the study had themselves experienced social media use as problematic, overwhelming or detrimental to their agency at some point. Since the concept of overload and vulnerability can be relatively abstract and complex to understand, the pre-screening questions were made as understandable as possible:

- Have you ever felt that using social media has been mentally draining or taken up too much of your energy?
- Have you consciously tried to reduce your use of social media or control it in some way?

The final selection was made via Instagram Stories on 27th of October 2025 via the researcher's own Instagram account. At the same time, the study partially utilized the snowball sampling method, as those who received the Story were also asked to share the story further or recommend research subjects in order to find potential interviewees. This sampling method is commonly used in qualitative research, especially when the phenomenon being studied is experiential, sensitive, or difficult to define. (Noy 2008, 330–331.)

During the recruitment phase, attention was given to the experiential diversity of the sample. Due to the voluntary nature of participation, which may lead to uneven response patterns, additional efforts were made to prevent a sample that would be highly skewed towards a particular gender. When the majority of early respondents were women, an additional call encouraging male participants to take part to the research was published. However, the intention was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to broaden the range of perspectives and lived experiences reflected in the data.

Although the target group was defined as young adults aged 18–30, one of the participants was 32 years old. This deviation was not considered significant for the study, as the participant belonged to

the same generational context and shared a similar social media usage history with the others. In qualitative research, the purpose of sampling is not to represent a specific population statistically accurately, but to produce analytically rich and meaningful data on the phenomenon being studied (Patton 2015, 310–311).

6.2.2 Operationalization and conducting the interviews

Before conducting the interviews, an operationalization table (Table 3) was created to help make the theoretical concepts and sub-problems of the study more understandable and concrete for the interviewees. Operationalization refers to the process of converting concepts into a measurable and researchable form, with the aim of enabling the examination of theoretical phenomena using empirical data (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 154–155). Abstract concepts such as social media overload, situational digital vulnerability, and coping were operationalized into more concrete, everyday interview themes and questions, which enabled the phenomenon to be examined from the participants' own point of view. A complete version of the operationalization table is included in Appendix 1.

Prior to the actual collection of the data, a pilot interview was performed in order to evaluate the clarity, appropriateness, and efficiency of the interview questions in relation to the research topic. Based on the pilot interview, slight modifications were made to the interview framework, especially on the questions for the interview. The pilot interview was not included in the actual research.

Table 3. Operationalization table

Research question(s)	Key terms	Interview themes	Examples of operationalized questions
RQ1. How do young consumers experience social media overload in a marketing-saturated social media environment?	Social media overload (Information, Social, System feature overload)	Everyday overload experiences (what feels “too much” on social media)	Questions 1–5 Have you ever felt that social media content or interaction is overwhelming? What created this feeling? How does this affect you in your everyday life?

	Marketing saturation; Attention economy	Marketing exposure during this overload	How do you feel about advertising and marketing communications in such stressful situations? Does it add to the stress?
RQ2. How does such overload translate into situational experiences of digital vulnerability in young consumers’ everyday lives?	Situational digital vulnerability; Diminished agency; Loss of control; Affective reactivity; Engagement pressure; Compulsive engagement	Moments of vulnerability (diminished agency and loss of control)	Questions 6–8 In these situations, did you feel a loss of control or difficulty disengaging? What kind of emotions or emotional reactions did you experience?
RQ3. What coping and self-regulation strategies do young consumers employ in response to this vulnerability?	Coping; Digital self- regulation; Avoidance; Withdrawal; Platform management; Cognitive coping, Emotional Coping	Coping and behavioral adjustments to feel better with social media	Questions 9–13 What do you usually do when social media feels overwhelming or negative? Have you tried to change your behavior or manage your use? How? Do you try to control your use or withdraw from social media? Why?

The operationalization table above illustrates how the key theoretical concepts from the theoretical framework were translated into the research’s interview themes and concrete questions that formed the basis of the interview framework (see, Appendix 2).

Based on this structure, 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between October 29 and December 3, 2025. The interviews were conducted either remotely via the Zoom video conferencing platform or face-to-face, and their duration varied between 29 and 64 minutes. The semi-structured format enabled both comparability between interviews and openness for the participants' experiences, interpretations, and new perspectives to emerge.

The participants of the study are presented in Table 4. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning new interviews no longer produced any significant new themes or conceptual insights (Glaser & Strauss 2017, 59-60).

Table 4. Young adults who participated in the study

Participant	Age	Gender	Current status	Location and date	Duration (min)	Most used social media platforms
P1	26	Male	Student	Zoom, 29.10.2025	37:47	Instagram, TikTok
P2	25	Male	Student	Zoom, 29.10.2025	47:40	Instagram, YouTube
P3	28	Female	Working	Zoom, 30.10.2025	40:04	Whatsapp, Instagram, TikTok
P4	29	Female	Working	Zoom, 31.10.2025	42:46	Whatsapp, Instagram
P5	22	Female	Student	Zoom, 2.11.2025	56:45	Instagram, Whatsapp
P6	27	Female	Student	Zoom, 2.11.2025	1:04:47	Whatsapp, Snapchat, TikTok
P7	32	Male	Working	Zoom, 4.11.2025	51:58	Whatsapp, Instagram, Tiktok
P8	27	Female	Working	Zoom, 4.11.2025	41:08	Instagram, Whatsapp, YouTube
P9	27	Female	Student	Zoom, 5.11.2025	29:57	Whatsapp, Instagram
P10	27	Male	Working	Zoom, 9.11.2025	44:58	Instagram, Reddit
P11	25	Male	Student	Live, 9.11.2025	30:06	Whatsapp, Instagram, YouTube
P12	20	Female	Student	Zoom, 11.11.2025	45:20	TikTok, Instagram

P13	27	Female	Student	Zoom, 11.11.2025	48:59	Instagram, LinkedIn
P14	22	Female	Student	Zoom, 15.11.2025	34:40	Instagram, TikTok, Whatsapp
P15	27	Male	Student	Live, 3.12.2025	32:45	Whatsapp, Instagram
P16	20	Male	Student	Live, 3.12.2025	48:09	Whatsapp, Instagram, YouTube

6.2.3 Ethical considerations

Qualitative research interviews examine human existence in detail. They open up access to subjective experiences and enable researchers to describe the intimate aspects of people's lives. (Brinkmann & Kvale 2005, 157.) For this reason, all research involving people must take into account the ethical issues that may arise during such interactions (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden 2001, 93). According to Guillemin and Gillam (2004, 262), ethical problems and their consideration are part of all types of research and research work.

Since this study examines potentially sensitive experiences related to social media use, overload, and vulnerability, special attention was paid to ethical considerations throughout the research process. According to Orb et al. (2001, 93), ethical harms can be prevented and reduced by applying appropriate ethical principles to research, which help protect people as research subjects and participants. This study adheres to the principles of Good Scientific Practice (Finnish: Hyvä tieteellinen käytäntö, HTK) such as general care, accuracy, respect, and honesty. This applies to research work, conducting interviews, recording results, and presenting and evaluating them. (TENK 2023, 11.)

Ethical principles, such as informed consent, anonymity, and participant well-being, guided all stages of the study (TENK 2023, 13). Orb et al. (2001, 93) emphasize that willingness to participate in research depends entirely on the participants' willingness to share their own experiences. The participants' willingness and informed consent were verified at several stages. Participation in the study was based on self-selection: those who responded to the screening questions contacted the researcher themselves via private message on either Instagram or WhatsApp. This allowed

participants to approach the researcher on their own initiative and on their own terms. These preliminary discussions covered the research topic and willingness to participate in the study, and if the participant wanted to participate in the study, a suitable time for the interview was agreed upon. After the initial contact, the participants were sent written research information and a consent request (see, Appendix 3) by email, describing the purpose of the study, the implementation method, the processing of the data, and the rights of the participants. This email confirmed that the participants were still willing to participate in the study.

On the interview days, before the interviews began, the purpose of the study, its practical implementation, and the intended use of the material in the master's thesis were discussed verbally with each participant. At the same time, the participants were asked for their separate consent to record the interview. It was emphasized to the participants that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to interrupt the interview or withdraw from the study at any stage without giving any reasons. This was done to ensure that the participants felt safe and retained control over their participation throughout the research process. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were also discussed during the interview. Participants were told that their identities couldn't be identified based on the interviews, analysis, or published results. The participants could check the quotes used in the study before they were finally published if they wished.

The research data was processed and stored in accordance with Good Scientific Practice (HTK) and applicable data protection legislation, including the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU 2016/679) and the Finnish Data Protection Act. The research data was used solely for the purposes of this study and was not disclosed to any external parties. The data was handled with care and in accordance with data security requirements throughout the research process, taking into account factors such as the storage location of the data and the use of strong passwords.

The interview data was pseudonymized during the analysis phase, meaning that individual participants cannot be identified from the research text and analysis material. The interview participants were given identifiers (e.g., P1, P2, P3), and any identifying information was kept separately from the research material and was in sole possession of the researcher. The amount of personal data was kept to a minimum and limited to information only necessary for the research. The researcher was responsible for storing and protecting the data and ensuring that it was used for the sole purpose of the research. A separate privacy statement (Appendix 4) was drawn up for the

study as required by GDPR, regarding the collection, use, storage, and disposal of the data. All identifiable data such as the interview recordings and any information that can directly identify the participants of the study will be destroyed after the final approval of the study, no later than the 30th of June, 2026. The anonymous data, such as the interview transcripts, will be retained for a period of five (5) years for potential future research and publication purposes, after which it will be securely deleted.

In line with the principles of qualitative interview research (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015; Rubin & Rubin 2012, 27–30), the interviews were carried out in a respectful and non-directive manner, focusing on the interviewer's attentive listening, so that the participants could structure their experiences from their own perspectives. While the researcher aimed to maintain a non-attached and neutral position, the interview situations were not emotionally distant. Empathetic listening – for example, through sympathetic body language, facial expressions, and attention to participants' emotional cues – was a key part of the interview process. The aim was to create a secure and warm environment where the participants could also deal with stressful or personal experiences. This approach is supported by previous research, which underlines the importance of ethical sensitivity and reflexivity, especially when dealing with phenomena related to vulnerability (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). However, empathy was not used as a means of guiding participants' interpretations or responses, but rather it was aimed to support their autonomy and self-directed articulation of their experiences. This approach can be seen as strengthening both the ethical validity through “empathic validity” of the research and the analytical richness of the data (Tracy 2010, 844–845).

6.3 Analysis of data

According to Boeije (2010, 76–77), in qualitative analysis, data is broken down into parts in order that it may be reassembled again in a way that is meaningful and significant. The data analysis of the study utilized thematic analysis, where identifiable themes are sought from the data being analyzed (Harding 2019, 104). As explained by Gibson and Brown (2009, 129), thematic analysis provides a way of connecting different experiences with each other, as well as different examples and features from the data. Furthermore, themes not only describe the data, but they also help in examining the data in a new way and produce new meanings from it. Thematic analysis is particularly well suited as the analysis method for this study, given that the aim of the study is not to describe individual narratives as such, but to identify recurring experiential structures and meanings in young consumers' descriptions of their use of social media.

Thematic analysis offers a flexible but robust way of analyzing qualitative data without locking the analysis into predetermined theoretical categories (Braun & Clarke 2022, 4). This is particularly important in research that is exploratory and inductive in nature and where key concepts (such as situational digital vulnerability and coping) are only clarified in part through the analysis of the data. The method allows the analysis to proceed in a data-driven manner, while at the same time being open to theoretical dialogue with previous literature (Braun & Clarke 2022, 9–10).

Furthermore, thematic analysis is well suited to situations where the phenomenon under study is multidimensional, experiential, and somewhat contradictory. Experiences of social media overload and vulnerability do not manifest themselves as unambiguous or linear processes, but rather involve overlapping emotions, ambivalence, and negotiation. Themes can be used to structure such experiences into analytical entities without overly reducing their complexity. (Braun & Clarke 2022, 7-8.) Braun and Clarke (2022, 6; see also Nowell et al. 2017) describe that the analysis process can be approached through six different stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) coding of the data, (3) creation of preliminary themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) reporting. These six stages were followed in this research and analysis process.

The analysis of the material was started as soon as possible after each interview so that the interviews and encounters were still fresh in the researcher's mind. Each remote interview was recorded using Zoom's recording feature, while live interviews were recorded using the phone's recording function. After the audio recordings were saved, Microsoft Word's Transcribe tool was used to assist with transcription. The material was then listened to carefully twice to identify any errors and corrections, while the material was transcribed verbatim so that the interviewees' expressions, hesitations, and emotional expressions were preserved for use in the analysis.

The analysis proceeded according to the principles of thematic analysis mentioned above. The material was read several times in its entirety, after which it was divided into smaller meaningful sections. These sections of the material were coded in a data-driven manner so that the codes primarily reflected the interviewees' own expressions, experiences, and conceptualizations. At this stage, the aim of the analysis was not theoretical abstraction, but rather to preserve the internal diversity and experiential differences within the material.

As the coding progressed, individual codes were grouped into broader themes that described recurring patterns of experience, meanings, and ways of structuring social media use. The themes were not created mechanically based on frequency, but rather with an emphasis on analytical relevance in relation to the research questions: how is overload perceived, in what situations does vulnerability become apparent, and what kinds of coping and self-regulation strategies do users describe? The themes thus served as analytical tools that allowed the data to be re-examined and related to a broader theoretical discussion. Constant comparison (see, Patton 2015, 658) was used throughout the analysis to ensure internal coherence between codes and themes and to refine conceptual distinctions as the analysis evolved.

The analysis process was iterative and reflective. Themes were refined, combined, and separated as the analysis progressed, and the data and theory were moved back and forth in an abductive spirit. Although the analysis was primarily inductive, the theoretical framework – particularly the literature on social media overload, agency, and consumer vulnerability – helped to deepen interpretations and place individual experiences in a broader context.

Special attention was also paid to contradictory and ambivalent accounts in which interviewees described both the benefits and the burdens of social media. These were not attempted to be “cleaned up” or resolved in the analysis, but were seen as a central part of the phenomenon under study. This approach was in line with the conceptual starting point of the study, in which social media is understood as a multidimensional, negotiable, and experientially contradictory environment (see, e.g. van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018; Beer 2017).

6.4 Methodological rigor

Qualitative research operates in a world of meanings and interpretations where certainty is not a given. Therefore, researchers must constantly ask themselves: have we captured the essence of the experience we sought to capture, or is it merely a reflection of our own perspective? Reliability is built on openness and a responsible relationship with the data. (Creswell & Poth 2024, 285.) One of the key turning points in the discussion of reliability in qualitative research was the trustworthiness framework presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This groundbreaking work is still considered a classic, structuring the credibility of qualitative research through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In this study, these principles were concretized as systematic analysis, reflexive awareness, and ethical sensitivity. Methodological rigor in this study did not

mean fulfillment of individual criteria from a list, but rather a comprehensive and consistent approach throughout the entire research process.

The credibility of the study was strengthened by the depth and reflectiveness of the data and constant comparison. The interviews did not merely describe social media use, but also revealed experiences of a sense of control over the environment, stress, and vulnerability. Screening questions were used to ensure that the participants had personal experience of the phenomenon, so that the analysis was not based on hypothetical situations or assumptions about vulnerability on behalf of the interviewees. Thematisation was conducted systematically and in stages in accordance with the principles of thematic analysis, consistent with the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) and based on the further refinements described by Nowell et al. (2017). The themes were formed from recurring meaning structures in several interviews, not from individual quotations. Quotations were used to demonstrate the grounding of the analysis in the data, which strengthens confirmability, i.e., the traceability of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

The credibility of the study was strengthened by using constant comparison, in which different parts of the data, such as quotations, observations made during interviews, and emerging themes, were systematically compared with each other during the analysis (Patton 2015, 658). Constant comparison helped in developing both the theory and explanations, while also enriching the description of the analysis. During the analysis, comparisons were used to continuously check the consistency and accuracy of the codes created, ensuring that the codes were indeed similar, but also examining any possible differences between them. Identifying different differences and variations made it possible to assess the internal consistency of the themes and to make the multi-voiced nature of the data visible.

Interpretive rigor was particularly important in this study due to the sensitivity of the topic. When dealing with sensitive material, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the participants' experiences are not simplified, dramatized, or interpreted on their behalf, but that they are presented as respectfully as possible and in their proper context (Orb et al. 2001, 94; Guillemin & Gillam 2004, 270). Digital vulnerability often did not manifest itself as a direct crisis, but rather as subtle descriptions of a loss of control or emotional strain. Recognizing these nuances required analytical patience, registering the nuances during transcription, and repeatedly reading the material.

The research process was documented step by step, which strengthens its dependability. Theoretical integrity was particularly important: the original linear framework was revised in light of the results and reformulated into a multidimensional model, which will be presented in connection with the results. This shows that the theory did not force the data into a predetermined structure, but rather that the research process remained open to conceptual reevaluation. Tracy (2010) talks about the "big-tent criteria" approach, in which high-quality qualitative research is simultaneously meaningful, rich, ethically sound, and theoretically consistent. In this study, rigor was not based on the technical accuracy of the analysis, but rather the results were linked to a broader critical discussion of the economic and algorithmic structures of platforms.

Reflexivity refers to a researcher's conscious effort to examine how their own views, experiences, and interactions influence their research. It is not a question of eliminating this subjectivity, but rather of critically recognizing and utilizing it as part of research understanding. (Finlay 2002, 531.) According to Pillow (2003, 178), reflexivity in qualitative research is primarily about examining power: how the researcher's position, theoretical choices, and research context shape what can be seen, said, and understood. In this study, reflexivity referred to a conscious balance between empathetic presence and analytical distance, as both had their important place in the context of this study.

The sensitivity of the subject matter – overload, loss of control, and experiences of vulnerability – required the creation of a safe atmosphere. At the same time, the researcher refrained from offering ready-made interpretative frameworks to the participants. Guillemin and Gillam (2004, 262–263) describe this kind of ongoing situational ethical sensitivity with the concept of “ethically important moments.” These moments occurred particularly when participants described conflicting or emotionally charged experiences. Reflexivity also extended to the researcher's own critical attitude toward social media structures. Awareness of this position was important so that the analysis would not become a normative statement but would remain at the experiential level.

The participants were highly educated young adults, which limits the generalizability of the results, in addition to the fact that the study used screening questions. However, the goal of qualitative research is not statistical representativeness, but rather a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Transferability is based on the reader's ability to assess the applicability of the results to other contexts, which is supported by a detailed description of the context and analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The limitations of the study will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

It is also particularly important to take into account the dynamic nature of social media environments; applications and the field are changing rapidly and at a fast pace. Algorithms, commercial practices, and user interfaces are constantly evolving. For this reason, the rigor of the research required contextual sensitivity: the results were clearly linked to the temporal and technological environment in which they were produced. Thus, this study does not present timeless claims about the effects of social media, but rather identifies experiential mechanisms that can be understood in relation to a specific environment. Such contextual sensitivity aligns with calls for transparency and reflexivity in qualitative research (Tracy 2010, 840–844). It is important to note that the study does not claim to present universal truths about social media, but it does offer an analytically grounded and data-anchored picture of how overload and digital vulnerability are constructed in a marketing-saturated algorithmic environment.

7 Analysis and results

The results of the study will be presented in this chapter according to the three research questions guiding the research. Therefore, the first subchapter deals with young adults' experiences of social media overload in a marketing-saturated social media environment. The second subchapter delves deeper into the experience of this overload and discusses the results related to experiences of situational digital vulnerability. Finally, the results related to the coping and self-regulation methods used by young adults in response to experiences of overload and vulnerability are reviewed.

Table 4 describes the background and characteristics of the 16 interviewees. Most of the interviewees were aged 25 or older (approximately 73%). The participants were fairly evenly distributed across educational and employment statuses: six were currently studying for a bachelor's degree, five were studying for a master's degree, and five were in employment at the time of the interview. The most commonly used social media platforms among the interviewees were Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube, and most participants reported being active on at least two to three different social media platforms on a regular basis.

7.1 Experiences of social media overload

Building on prior research, social media overload was approached through three commonly recognized dimensions: information overload, social overload, and system feature overload (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Yu et al. 2018; Whelan et al. 2020). These three dimensions formed the preliminary analytical framework for the interviews (see, Interview framework, Appendix 2). These dimensions were presented to participants as broad themes, and they were encouraged to freely describe all their experiences related to them. The categories thus served as an organizing framework for the analysis rather than as predefined response categories.

7.1.1 Information overload

The findings show that information overload on social media is perceived by the interviewees primarily as a continuous and intense stream of content, which quickly becomes cognitively demanding to process. The interviewees describe situations in which an initially pleasant or entertaining experience gradually becomes stressful as more content accumulates than they have time or capacity to process.

Several interviewees mention experiencing overexcitement, where using social media initially produces positive feelings such as laughter, interest, or a good vibe, but gradually becomes uncontrollable and stressful. One interviewee describes this change in particularly concrete terms:

At first, you feel good, and you know, those videos and messages and everything make you laugh, but then when it just keeps coming and coming and coming, you can't even process it anymore... it's just too much. (P1)

The material also points to the experience of sensory overload and fragmented content. The interviewees describe browsing social media as a situation in which individual posts form an uninterrupted stream, and the user is not necessarily aware of being exposed to hundreds of different stimuli in a short period of time:

The number of sensory stimuli is absolutely enormous... every single social media post is like its own thing, and you scroll through hundreds and hundreds of them every day without even noticing. (P4)

In a way, for someone who is just getting into [social media] now, it's kind of shocking. I don't think the human mind is made for this, for seeing so many things and so much perfection and glossy images. (P13)

In these descriptions, information overload is not only seen as a phenomenon related to the amount of information, but also as an experience where attention is fragmented and where it becomes difficult to form a meaningful whole. The constant change and intensity of the content prevents the users from pausing and processing the information more deeply.

In addition, the data also reveals situations where users are looking for specific information or inspiration on social media, but they end up spending considerably more time on the social media platform than they originally intended. In such cases, the amount of information and the endless content stream offered by the platforms guide the users toward prolonged and deeper browsing:

So when I search for things, I'm trying to get lost in a bit of a rabbit hole, and I often end up spending much more time browsing and searching than I initially intended. (P10)

Based on the above descriptions, information overload in the context of social media is constructed as an experience in which the amount, continuity, and sensory intensity of the content exceed the cognitive resources of the users. The overload does not arise from individual pieces of content, but from their uninterrupted flow on the platforms, which maintains a constant state of activation and makes it difficult to structure, limit, and purposefully use the information.

7.1.2 Social overload

The data shows that the interviewees do not view social media overload as an experience merely associated with the amount of information, but also as a strongly social and interactive experience. The interviewees describe social media environments as spaces where communication is constant, expectations to respond are implicit, and interaction is often felt as obligatory. Several interviewees highlighted the burden of communication applications such as Snapchat. The data emphasizes the experience of constant messaging and meaningless content, which contribute to the feeling of burden. One interviewee describes how messages arrive "non-stop" and often concern everyday matters or things that are irrelevant to them, which makes interaction more burdensome than voluntary:

It felt kind of overwhelming that there were nonstop messages coming in [on Snapchat] about terribly trivial things, like shopping and other stuff. (P3)

In the data, overload is also strongly linked to social expectations of constant availability. The interviewees describe situations where not responding to messages or calls is easily interpreted as indifference or social neglect. This creates a feeling of constant surveillance and pressure to respond, even when one's own life situation or coping abilities do not support it:

You kind of feel like you should always be available, even when you don't actually want to be. (P11)

If someone sees that you've been active but you don't reply, it feels like you're ignoring them. (P14)

The conflict between one's own agency and the expectations of others is particularly noticeable. The interviewees acknowledge that they would not like to be constantly on the phone or immediately available, but still feel pressure to do so due to social norms. One interviewee describes this tension through frustration:

If you are with your telephone turned off and they call you and you don't answer or they send you a message, they always say like: hey, why did you spend so much time to answer me? Like, hey, I have a life. You know, I have a life. You're not the only friend I have. -- And people should think about that. Because you have the urge to be constantly like, checking your phone. Hey, they have sent me a message. They have called me. No, and that's not what you need to do. (P16)

The experience of social overload was also closely tied to individuals' broader life situations and perceived capacity to manage social interaction. Several interviewees noted that the burden of communication becomes particularly salient during periods of heightened workload or stress, when their cognitive and emotional resources are already limited:

Yeah, especially by time management or time reducing because especially in times where I'm very busy and already kind of mentally overloaded – overloaded with work or especially like in studies when I have exams or like writing a thesis – I would basically not use the app at all because I feel like I have no capacity to deal with this and I have more other things to go on. (P15)

In these accounts, social overload is constructed as a normative expectation in which technical features (e.g., “seen” functions) become social obligations. The overload does not arise from individual messages, but from the constant demand for availability, which weakens the user's ability to regulate their own participation in social interaction. In this sense, social overload is directly linked to perceived agency. This indicates that social overload is not only produced by the structural expectations of constant availability, but also by the mismatch between these expectations and individuals' situational capacity to respond.

7.1.3 System feature overload

The descriptions provided by the interviewees' highlight the experience of the platforms not being passive operating environments, but rather ones that actively direct the user's attention or focus, and increase engagement. The system feature overload has three major intertwined themes: the perceived addictiveness of algorithms, the limiting of choice, and the structural infinity of platforms.

Several interviewees described algorithms as systems that “learn” user preferences and tailor content more effectively to increase engagement. Although the technical functioning of algorithms is not necessarily understood in detail, their impact is clearly felt in the form of increased addictiveness and compulsiveness. In the data, this is reflected in the experience that social media use has become more intense and difficult to control over time:

Like, it [the algorithm] somehow knows how to experiment more and learns better. I don't know what they've done there, but somehow I feel like it's really more addictive. (P1)

Yeah, and I do feel like that because of the algorithms and they know how to keep you hooked on the things that definitely plays into that overload, because it's hard to stop and you just get sort of addicted. (P11)

In these descriptions, algorithms are portrayed as almost humanly actors (e.g. describing algorithm with words “it” or “they”) that not only provide content but also shape the user experience in a way that increases stress and reduces the user's ability to disconnect.

Another key aspect of system feature overload relates to the experiences in which users feel that their own choices regarding content are overshadowed by algorithmic curation. The interviewees described their frustration with situations where platforms offered content on behalf of the user, even though the user would like to have more control over the content they see, or the recommendations didn't align with the original purpose for using the platform. Algorithmic content streams, such as the “For You” page in Instagram, were particularly experienced as intrusive and burdensome, because they were perceived to redirect users from intentional use towards a more passive consumption:

That's why I don't use Instagram as much anymore, because I hate the new "For You" page. I only want to see the ones I've said I want to see. (P6)

So we have that problem with short videos, the scrolling, and with Instagram too... I don't want to be in Instagram and scrolling because it's not what I want Instagram for. (P16)

What is noteworthy in these quotations is not solely the dissatisfaction with specific features, but a deeper tension between user intention and platform logic. Interviewees' descriptions suggest that system feature overload is related to the experience that the platform no longer functions as a tool that helps users achieve their goals, but instead begins to redirect attention and focus elsewhere according to its own operational logic. In this sense, for instance, the Instagram's "For You" page is no longer seen merely as a feature of the platform, but as the platform's attempt to prioritize continuous engagement over user control.

The third key form of system feature overload found in this study is related to the structural endlessness of platforms. The interviewees described continuous scrolling, short videos, and quantitative excess of content as experiences where the use has no inherent or natural endpoint. In such environments, the use does not progress toward a clear endpoint or conclusion, but remains an open-ended, continuous flow without clear limits. This shifts the responsibility for discontinuing use solely to the user, which was perceived as burdensome, especially when the content itself is entertaining, easy to approach, and effortless to consume:

It's basically that you're experiencing something that has only a start and no ending... you would have to put an end to that and that can sometimes be kind of hard. (P12)

These descriptions highlight not only the sheer volume of content but also a qualitative shift regarding time and how usage is structured. Social media use no longer consists of activities with clear starting and ending points; instead, platforms have begun to support more features and functions that emphasize so-called "endless" use, where participation extends as far and as long as possible. In this case, stopping use does not occur structurally but requires active and often effortful action and a decision on the part of the user. As shown in Table 5, the interviewees repeatedly mentioned this as a key source of stress in their experiences.

In these cases, the concept of system and information overload overlap, although the focus is particularly on the platform's structural way of maintaining continuous use without a clear endpoint. The lack of these natural stopping points can be seen as a design choice that encourages continued use and leaves it up to the user to set their own limits. This, in turn, can be seen as increasing the cognitive and self-regulatory demands placed on users, as pausing usage requires constant conscious evaluation and decision-making. Table 5 summarizes the key manifestations of social media overload identified in the data.

Table 5. Experiences of social media overload by the participants

Key findings	Description
<i>Information Overload</i>	
Continuous content flow and fragmented attention	Social media is perceived as a constant stream of content, where a large number of images, videos, and messages fragment attention and make content processing burdensome.
Escalation of social media use	Use often starts out as entertaining, but becomes burdensome as it continues. Users find themselves using the platform longer than they originally planned.
<i>Social Overload</i>	
Social pressure and the norms of constant availability	Social media creates an expectation of constant availability. Not responding to messages can feel socially problematic, which increases the pressure to be constantly present.
Tension between social expectations and personal capacity	Users describe situations where social expectations to be active and available conflict with their own well-being and time management.
<i>System Feature Overload</i>	
Algorithmic guidance and endless scroll	Algorithms constantly provide interesting content to users, making it addictive and difficult to stop using. Endless scrolling increases the duration of use.
Platform structures as a source of overload	Overload is not only related to the amount of content, but also to how platforms are designed to maintain continuous use and engagement.

7.2 Experiences of situational digital vulnerability

In the interview material, social media overload often appears as a starting point, but the interviewees' descriptions and accounts also refer to more far-reaching situations in which overload turns into momentary experiences of vulnerability. In these situations, the use of social media no longer appears to be a fully conscious choice, but rather an experience in which exposure to different content and behavior occurs partly beyond the user's control.

Based on the data, five frequently recurring experiential mechanisms emerged: (1) *diminished agency and experience of loss of control*, (2) *incidental exposure and affective reactions*, (3) *social pressure and difficulty disengaging*, (4) *perceived algorithmic control* ja (5) *perceived loss of time and meaning*. These experiential mechanisms will be examined in more detail in the following subsections.

7.2.1 Diminished agency and experience of loss of control

One of the most significant forms of situational vulnerability had to do with the experience of diminished agency and control in the use of social media, in line with the theoretical framework. Several interviewees described social media use as situations in which their own agency seemed to be overshadowed by the systems and the algorithm. In the data, algorithms were not seen as neutral recommenders, but as active agents that “plays on the user’s brain chemistry” in a way that is difficult to resist for the user. The experience of vulnerability arises precisely from this asymmetry where the user is aware of what is happening but the experience of control still remains weak:

But it's a monster in the sense that it's difficult to not let it [algorithm] swallow you. (P2)

Have to play smart. Still the algorithm is smarter than you and you lose anyways. It feels in a way that you are fighting against it using all kinds of rational methods against algorithms, but what can I do as a human if they're playing with my brain chemistry? (P4)

It's so difficult, because they are so inside our brain. They know how our brain works and they try to exploit all those vulnerabilities and they are so good on that. (P16)

What is particularly interesting about the data is that several of the interviewees described to be highly aware of the operating logic of platforms and the impact of algorithms, but despite this awareness, they claimed to have difficulty in avoiding the influence of the platforms' algorithms. The data seems to imply that users may be able to identify the guiding and engaging logic of platforms quite clearly or precisely, but they may still find it difficult to resist these influences in their own behavior. In other words, a user may be aware of what is happening, but may still feel drawn into a pattern of use that does not seem entirely of their own choice. This speaks to the experiential nature of vulnerability, where awareness does not necessarily protect users from the influence of systems.

This loss of control is not limited to isolated slip-ups or exceptional circumstances, but is woven into the everyday use of social media. Use is repeatedly described as a habit, a reflex, rather than a conscious decision:

I think it's what I find super frustrating is that it never really seems like a conscious decision. -- It just feels like a habit and a reflex. (P11)

This quote highlights the frustration that arises in situations where the use of certain media no longer feels entirely voluntary. It is not simply a matter of usage being "excessive"; rather, usage begins to override conscious intention. This is a significant observation, as it suggests that rather than a decline in agency arising from sudden interruptions, it occurs instead in the midst of everyday life, through repetitive, almost imperceptible practices. Opening the app, scrolling through it, and consuming content often begin before conscious thought. Vulnerability then arises as an experience of a diminished ability to act in accordance with one's own goals within the usage situations themselves. Social media begins, as it were, to "happen to the user," rather than the user actively feeling in control of it. This does not mean, however, that agency disappears entirely, but rather that it becomes more unstable and harder to maintain.

7.2.2 Incidental exposure and affective reactions

Situational digital vulnerability also manifests itself in the data in situations where social media content evokes very strong emotional reactions. The interviewees describe social media environments as spaces where emotionally charged content often appears quickly, unexpectedly, and without the user actively seeking it out. The descriptions reveal that users do not just encounter

negative or otherwise provocative content; rather, they become emotionally drawn into it, as if through an interruption. Several participants described situations in which, as if by force, they were drawn or "sucked" into negative discussions or emotionally charged situations without intending to participate in them:

You get pulled into arguments or negativity even if you didn't plan to. (P6)

Sometimes I notice I get really irritated or angry without even knowing why. (P8)

Like when you look at even at a feel-good post. Sometimes I already know which comments are going to be there to be received. But still even the feedback to a nice post when I'm reading it [the comments]... can be already overwhelming emotional wise. I get aggressive when I read certain things. (P10)

Every time I go into Twitter and I close Twitter, I... I feel radicalized. I feel anxious. I feel angry. I feel... because of the situation that is right now in the world. And that's why I uninstalled it. (P16)

These situations are particularly significant because they demonstrate that social media can thus bypass the user's original intended purpose. Several interviewees described using social media to relax, enjoy themselves, disconnect from everyday life, or take a "short break." However, in the accounts, this planned relaxation or break could turn into situations where they encountered distressing news, polarized discussions, or otherwise emotionally taxing situations:

I find it most difficult when the world situation is stressful. Because I think that usually TikTok is like a break from the day for me -- A nice little break, so then it's not a nice little break if I just see more and more terrible news and broadcasts all the time. (P6)

You see, for example, this morning I saw a video of like, it was in Instagram, a bad video of the war in Ukraine and Russia, like some soldiers dying. So I started the day like this [shows smile] but when I saw the video, my day completely decreased. (P16)

As may be gleaned from these excerpts, it is not necessarily negative emotions that bring about a state vulnerability, but rather the shattering of expectations, or a change in user experience. In these

accounts, the platform is no longer functioning as a space for recovery or a break, but may instead instantaneously transform into an emotionally taxing environment. This contradiction appears as a key mechanism between intended use and perceived content, wherein situational digital vulnerability may be formed.

The interviews also reveal that emotional reactions do not always have time to fully take shape before they are already felt: irritation, anger, anxiety, or sadness can arise immediately – and sometimes even before the user is able to articulate what has caused or triggered them. This is of analytical interest because it implies that in these situations vulnerability is not only a matter of reflection and interpretation, but also pre-reflective and bodily. Not only do so social media content inform or persuade; they also directly influence the user's mood and arousal levels. This can give the user the experience that reactions simply “happen” to them.

However, the accounts of the interviewees also suggest that there is a deeper loss of control and asymmetry in sight, linked to algorithmic environments. Not only did the users react to individual pieces of content, but also to the logic of platforms and algorithms, which “learn” from users' reactions and utilize them in the future. This can create a vicious cycle in which intense emotions are seemingly fueled by the environment and potentially reinforced by it. The experience of vulnerability might be intensified, particularly in situations where the user feels that their own emotional reactions are no longer private and/or random, but are possibly shaped as part of the platforms' predictive and guiding logic:

I feel that the content usually manipulates you to have some like reaction. And first of all, what I don't like is when I see a video that somehow triggers me. It's like the algorithm learns that about me. And it freaks me out sometimes. (P15)

Taken together, these findings suggest that incidental exposure can create situations of digital vulnerability, as it makes emotional reactions in social media contexts difficult to predict, avoid, and regulate. The problem is not simply the presence of upsetting content, but the logic of the environment in which it is presented. Vulnerability is, so to speak, constructed at the intersection of affective reactivity and the structural logic of the platforms. Users are not just "sensitive" to content but rather they operate in environments that systematically generate and sustain intense emotional reactions, which they are not in control of or able to filter out.

7.2.3 Social pressure and difficulty disengaging

The data also clearly highlights the social dimension: vulnerability arises in situations where social media is perceived as essential, even though it is burdensome. In particular, professional expectations, following trends, and constant availability create a vicious circle:

If i'm not in the social media, well in a way I have to be. -- I just need to follow the trends and if I need to follow the trends, I need to follow social media. So it's like a never-ending cycle. I'm like a hamster running on that wheel you know. (P4)

For instance, this description shows how the use of social media can be related to broader social and professional expectations. In other words, the use of social media may not be seen as only a personal choice, but as part of the way the user engages with timeliness, visibility, and connectedness. In this way, vulnerability is not linked exclusively to the structure and logic of platforms, but also to social norms, such as what it means today to be “present,” up to date, or to be connected to other people. The metaphor of the “hamster wheel” captures the experience that there may be no way out; i.e., that the process of disengagement may be seen as a major risk that one may not be able or dare to take. This may lead to situations where disengaging from social media can seem difficult or problematic, even when its negative consequences and effects are acknowledged:

I have this thing where I sometimes delete the app [Instagram]. I realize that, okay, I don't like how addictive it is. But then at the same time, I have this feeling that I'm missing out. Like, other people's stuff, or that I'm interested in what my friends and acquaintances are doing. (P8)

But then you usually realize, okay, I just texted somebody and I asked him something and I need the answer, so it's hard to really disconnect yourself completely. (P11)

The interviewees' descriptions illustrate the extent to which social media has become embedded in everyday life today. The process of disconnecting was also identified as a potential disruption to social relationships, responsiveness, and reciprocity. This can make disengaging challenging, especially when it can mean missing out on information, delayed responses, or a reduced social presence.

In addition to these structural pressures, social comparison emerged in the data as one of the key dimensions of vulnerability. The interviewees described how social media makes it easy to be repeatedly exposed to other people's lives, which may be "heavily edited" or curated. This, in turn, prompted them to reflect on their own lives, achievements, or lifestyles:

And it's like, you see their lives romanticized and in every picture they seem super productive, and amazing everyday routines or whatever, which makes you definitely like ponder about your life. (P12)

Like it comes so many times the feeling, that I haven't achieved enough. (P13)

But for personal reasons, I think a lot of times I see like influencers living on yachts and going on holidays and having expensive clothes and designer shoes and everything. And I'm like, okay, I cannot afford it. I have to go to school tomorrow. I cannot be in the Bahamas right now. Very nice. That's also like, you mirror yourself. (P14)

The key point is that this is not necessarily limited to a single specific instance of comparison but, rather, the fact that social media enables a constant flow of idealized content. Social comparison becomes intertwined with content streams, meaning users may be exposed to them suddenly and may find it difficult to avoid or consciously regulate them, at least entirely. Over time, such situations can shape the user's way of seeing and evaluating themselves – not so much through conscious, continuous comparison, but often through unnoticed encounters that one might ponder and reflect on afterward. In this sense, we can also examine structural conditions, as vulnerability is not merely a result of comparison, but also a result of conditions that make comparison constant and normalized and, moreover, difficult to avoid entirely.

7.2.4 Perceived algorithmic and platform control

The interview data reveals that social media platforms are not neutral for users, but rather extensive and influential systems that shape the logic of the entire operating environment. In many of the interviewees' descriptions, algorithms and platforms themselves even appear as human-like actors that actively organize content and guide user behavior, in line with the findings in the system feature overload section. One of the interviewees describes it this way:

It feels like people, countries, and decision-makers are all so small compared to those big giants that have millions and millions, billions of users. In a way, it feels like they're a bit like Shein and Temu, who are running a billion-dollar business over there. (P4)

This description reflects the perceived imbalance of power between individual users and large platform operators, which several interviewees highlighted. Interviewees felt that these platforms and their developers are “dominant actors” whose resources, influence, and scale exceed an individual’s ability and control to influence the situation. The fact that these platforms are described in these situations, using the pronoun “they”, also indicates that there is an intention associated with these systems that might further contribute to the feeling that this activity is directed at them from outside and is thus not entirely within their own control.

The material also addressed the issue of the experience that commercial content and other content are mixed in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish between them. Specifically, influencer content and native marketing were sometimes perceived as unclear, which makes it harder for users to distinguish authentic communication from commercial influence:

But it is kind of exhausting, and from a marketing perspective, I think it's a kind of hidden marketing that social media is full of. You don't know if something is an advertisement or not... (P6)

In a way it's quite crazy that even though people are mainly looking to just connect with others, there's so much commercial content mixed in there too. (P9)

This blurring of content creates a sense of diminished transparency: users are unsure of the intentions behind the content – or what those intentions might be in the future. In such cases, the entire environment may appear less reliable and harder to grasp, which can increase both cognitive and emotional strain. In some accounts, this lack of control and clarity was even perceived as intrusive or manipulative:

And I feel like, I kind of feel inhumane just because I feel perceived just as a person who buys and just a victim. I feel like they're trying to brainwash me... Just like push, push, push, push, push. This product, this product, 10 products. No, no, you, you, you, better, fancier, more expensive. Get it. Get it now. Get it. Get it! (P12)

In the above quote, the concept of vulnerability is not only linked with the amount of commercial content, but also with the experience of being “reduced” to an object of influence. In these descriptions, vulnerability arises from the experience where it is difficult for the user to predict when they will be influenced and when they will not. However, the interviewees also described some forms of resistance, such as a conscious desire not to react to commercial stimuli or to question their intentions:

After a certain point, I'm seeing something again and again and again. I'm just like, I would like that, I would like to buy that, but I'm not buying that because marketing is going on my nerves. So I'm more like, you told me to do something, so I'm not going to do that type of person. (P10)

However, such forms of resistance seem to be situational and, to some extent, cumbersome, as the user must repeatedly make the decision not to react to these stimuli. Even if users are critical and aware, mere awareness does not eliminate the asymmetry between the platforms and the users. These tensions and negotiations are examined in more detail in the context of coping and self-regulation.

7.2.5 Perceived loss of time and meaning

In addition, situational digital vulnerability is also evident in the data in reflections on how the use of social media affects other available time, everyday life, and one's own life. Many interviewees described situations in which social media takes time away from activities and tasks that they themselves consider more meaningful:

Then the day has gone by and you haven't done anything meaningful. I just don't see scrolling through Instagram as a particularly meaningful thing to do. It also weighs on you mentally, because you could have used that time more reasonably. (P3)

Like, how do I spend my time as a young person? Could I be doing something else with that time? Surely. (P8)

Interview accounts such as these show that vulnerability is not only related to the amount of time spent online, but also to how that time is experienced and evaluated in relation to one's own life (values, goals, and sense of meaning). For the interviewees, social media use begins to seem problematic especially when it displaces other activities that users would have considered more important, meaningful, or useful. Such reflections often arise after the fact, when users evaluate their social media use after prolonged browsing or scrolling:

If I've been watching IG reels for three hours straight, would I be able to even name three or four of the ones I watched in those clips? No, I wouldn't. (P8)

When I spent hours and hours on TikTok and just rotting in my bed and scrolling and scrolling. And then at the end of my scroll session, like 3 hours in, i'm like okay, what did I learn? What did I see? And I don't remember anything. I just spent three hours laying in my bed. I could have gone to a cafe with a friend or do some schoolwork or something. (P14)

It is worth noting that the feeling of vulnerability often arises specifically in hindsight. While using the device, browsing may have felt effortless, entertaining, or even relaxing, but upon later reflection, the same activity may come across as empty, meaningless, or even a waste of time. In these situations, vulnerability is no longer associated with the use of social media solely itself, but also to the subsequent realization that the time spent on the platform has not produced any lasting meaning, general significance in life, or memorable content. This, therefore, can create a sense of wasted time: the user not only reflects on what was done, but also on what could have been done differently.

Overall, the interview data shows that situational digital vulnerability appears in the data as recurring moments embedded in everyday life, in which users' sense of control and mastery of the platform, emotional balance, or ability to regulate their own actions begins to falter. Based on the data, this vulnerability is often constructed through experiential mechanisms, which are presented in the table below (see Table 6). However, it is important to note that these mechanisms do not appear in the data as separate or isolated from each other, but rather intertwine in ways that make social media use feel less like one's own activity and more like something that happens on the terms of the environment.

If we delve briefly into the realm of semantics, the language used by the interviewees points to the depth of the phenomenon. As the data demonstrated, social media is not only described as "disturbing" or "excessive," but is also characterized with words such as "monster," "swallow you," "hooked," "hollow," "radicalized," "freaks me out," and "it just happens to me." Such expressions suggest that it is not just a matter of the amount of stimuli or the passage of time, but a genuine experience in which the user's relationship to his or her own thoughts, emotions, and behavior momentarily seems to become or feel alien or difficult to control. It is particularly noteworthy that many interviewees describe their use of social media in a way that suggests their actions are not entirely intentional, but rather reflexive, automatic, or as if guided by external forces.

Table 6. Experiential mechanisms of situational digital vulnerability

<i>Situational Digital Vulnerability</i>	
Experiential mechanism	Description
Diminished agency and loss of control	Users describe situations where social media use feels automatic or habitual rather than a conscious choice. Algorithms and platform structures are perceived as factors that guide behavior in ways that are difficult to resist.
Affective exposure and emotional reactivity	Users are often exposed to emotionally charged or provocative content in social media feeds without actively seeking or selecting it. This can cause for example irritation, anxiety, or anger.
Social pressure and difficulty of disengaging	Social media is perceived as an environment where participation feels socially necessary. This creates pressure to follow events, respond to messages, and keep up with others' lives, even if the user would like to disconnect from the platform.
Perceived algorithmic control	Interviewees describe algorithms as systems or even human-like actors that control content and user behavior in a way that is perceived as asymmetrical in relation to the influence of individual users.
Perceived loss of time and meaning	Many users describe situations where social media use takes time away from other activities that are considered more

	meaningful. Use is often viewed critically in retrospect, leading to feelings of frustration or guilt, for example.
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7.3 Coping and digital self-regulation strategies

The previous section examined situations in which social media use begins to appear vulnerable among young users. However, the interview data shows that young users do not generally remain passive in these situations, but instead actively seek to do something to regulate their use of social media or protect their own well-being digitally and offline.

Based on the data, these strategies range from simple practical solutions to more extensive ways of modifying one's relationship with social media. Some strategies are based directly on limiting or discontinuing use, while others aim to change the social media experience, for example by influencing the content that is visible or by adding "friction" to its use. In addition, some coping strategies take place on a cognitive and emotional level, as users consciously seek to interpret, reflect on, and contextualize their own experiences in relation to social media environments.

The interview data indicates that coping and digital self-regulation do not constitute a single coherent strategy, but are constructed through various strategies, which in the interview data were: *withdrawal and disengagement, increasing friction, physical distancing and everyday routines, content and algorithm management, cognitive and emotional self-regulation, and ambivalent coping*. The following subsections examine these key strategies found in the data.

7.3.1 Withdrawal and disengagement from social media

One of the clearest coping strategies evident in the interview data is the decision to withdraw from social media when the burden or feeling of vulnerability becomes too overwhelming. In the data, the interviewees explain how social media use is no longer felt to be in their control but has instead started to fuel their feelings of unease, and the only way to cope with this is to withdraw and cut off exposure completely. This withdrawal may be temporary or long-term, and it often appears as a conscious attempt to try and reclaim control:

I put my phone completely away because I know if I'm like on TikTok and I go to Instagram, yeah, it will be the same thing like in half an hour. So I just put it away completely. (P14)

Several of the interviewees also describe longer breaks during which they delete the app completely. In these accounts, the break is not only seen as a way of reducing social media use but also as a way to reevaluate one's relationship with the platform and the way it makes them feel:

Yes, usually when I start to feel negative, I tend to withdraw from that platform completely. At one point, I deleted my Instagram account for a year. And I was without it for a year, and I wanted to see how it really affected me, because I was constantly feeling so bad. (P13)

The impact of these breaks is often described positively, even though they are rarely experienced as a permanent solution to disengage from social media. Instead, they tend to function as temporary pauses that allow users to regain a sense of balance and distance from the platforms. During longer breaks, attention shifts away from other people's lives toward one's own everyday life and experience of presence:

I also, I had a couple of times where I deleted Instagram and that actually worked quite well for like, I think I had like one or two months so I didn't have Instagram and that was nice. (P11)

When I don't have Instagram... I'm more focused on my everyday life. I'm more present. (P12)

In these accounts, withdrawal does not imply the stoppage of using social media but can also manifest as a process of redefining the boundaries between the self and the platform. It can also imply the generation of time and psychological distance, allowing users to step back from that environment for a moment and re-examine their own habits, needs, and priorities. In some situations, however, withdrawal also means shifting one's attention to other matters or activities:

Then I put my phone away, even if I'm listening to something, like a podcast or music, and go for a walk. (P8)

In such situations, disengagement does not simply mean stopping the use of social media, but also redirecting attention to other everyday activities. These activities can be perceived, for example, as more meaningful, calming, or grounding. This underscores the fact that coping is not only about reducing exposure to social media but also involves refocusing one's attention on different aspects of daily life.

At the same time, the data suggests that these periods of disengagement may influence how users view social media in general when they return to the platforms. Temporarily “being on the outside” can make issues such as commercial logic, content saturation, and various attempts to influence users more visible or open to question. As a result, users may return to the platform with a “more critical approach” or adopt new strategies to better manage their own use. However, this increased awareness has not yet led to a permanent disengagement in the data, but rather to a process of continuous adaptation and negotiation in relation to the platform environment.

7.3.2 Regulating use by increasing friction

Many interviewees described trying to regulate their social media use by deliberately adding “friction” to it, in other words, making social media clearly more difficult, cumbersome, or unpleasant to use. Instead of relying solely on self-discipline, interviewees are changing their technical or everyday practices in ways that make impulsive use more difficult. One example of this is using social media through a browser instead of a phone app, which makes it slower and less smooth to use:

My coping mechanism is actually that I use Instagram through my browser, because it works so much worse that you can't use it for long. (P8)

Another example is reducing visual appeal by using, for example, a black-and-white filter on their phone, which makes the screen completely black and white:

Also the screen in the phone, I put it in black and white, in gray patterns. So it's not as stimulating or addictive -- And you see, wow, this is so boring. And then you get out of Instagram. (P16)

The third example that emerged from the data was the use of various digital tools that limit screen time on phones or apps or interrupt the user's browsing:

I have like three apps on my phone, two of them nowadays, that limit screen time. It's kind of like an intervention, like, hey, maybe you should do something else instead. (P1)

At least on Instagram you can set a time limit so that it notifies you. Is it 5 minutes before the daily limit is reached? That it's time to stop using the apps. (P9)

What I once did was like... there are these apps which are called minimalist phone or something, where you can... where it changes the layout of everything, so that it's not so easy to get to the time-wasting apps and everything. (P11)

The majority of the interviewees also talked about controlling the amount of external stimuli by turning off notifications from the app itself. This is an attempt to protect themselves from constant digital interruptions and safeguard their own attention:

I also turn off the notifications of Instagram, WhatsApp. I only have my notifications of the e-mail and the phone calls. But the other notifications I turn off. So, if I'm using my phone, I don't get bombarded by the notifications, like tick, tick, tick, so I'm focused on what I'm doing at the moment. (P16)

In these solutions, the focus of the coping is not only on the user's own active decision-making process, but also on the environment of use. The users are actively trying to reshape the social media landscape so that it better serves their own goals. With the help of these strategies, users consciously seek to reduce the appeal of social media and impulsive use, thereby making it easier to limit their usage. Increasing friction is a key mechanism here. By increasing friction – in this context, by slowing down the user experience, reducing visual appeal, or interrupting the flow – users seek to reintroduce moments of pause into their experience. These small delays or obstacles can provide more space for reflection and the opportunity to make more conscious decisions about usage. In this way, friction acts as a support structure for the self-regulation of the interviewees: it does not eliminate the need for conscious decision-making, but facilitates it by creating situations where automatic behavior is interrupted.

7.3.3 Physical distancing and everyday routines

The data also repeatedly highlighted various concrete ways of creating physical distance from the phone and social media. In such situations, the phone is moved out of sight or to another room to make automatic or reflexive use more difficult:

I just put my phone to the other room, to my brother's room or I just, you know, trying to keep my phone away from myself. (P5)

I always try to keep my phone out of sight for me. I open the wardrobe. I put it there. (P16)

In some cases, this distance is created in very concrete ways and even requires physical effort:

We have quite a high bed, so I put it under the bed... that forces me the next morning to stand up. (P10)

The descriptions emphasize that self-regulation can also rely on making use of the body, space, and the material arrangements of everyday life. Physically removing the phone from close proximity makes it harder to use and breaks automated chains of action. At the same time, it highlights just how strongly social media use is linked to habits, routines, and situations where the device is readily available.

Furthermore, there were also some times of day that were considered particularly vulnerable in terms of social media use, such as in the evenings and before going to bed. In these situations, they consciously try to limit their use:

I wouldn't use it in the evening before going to bed... the psyche seems to be kind of vulnerable at night. (P15)

This highlighted the fact that, for the interviewees, vulnerability is also a phenomenon that unfolds over time. Certain moments in daily life – such as fatigue, being alone, or the reflective state at the end of the day – can weaken self-regulation and increase the likelihood of turning to social media. Users then proactively seek to establish various routines and boundaries to protect themselves

during these particularly sensitive moments when they recognize that they are in a more vulnerable state.

7.3.4 Content and algorithm management

In addition to withdrawal, the data highlights strategies in which users remain on social media platforms but seek to modify what they see or experience on those platforms. In the case of the interviewees, this is done, for example, by deleting or blocking accounts they follow, muting content, or reporting it:

I have also consciously unfollowed the kind of people that cause me some bad feelings. And I have also muted a lot of content. (P4)

I just removed all the ones that didn't resonate with me or some people who didn't bring good energy. (P13)

I consciously unfollow content that I don't want to see. (P15)

In the above cases, the interviewees have set boundaries consciously and actively, thus protecting their own experience and well-being on social media. The interviewees are trying to minimize the likelihood of encountering content that evokes negative emotions and create a “more pleasant” or safer content environment for themselves. At the same time, one could argue that these actions reflect a need to regain some sense of control in a situation where the flow of content is perceived as partially uncontrollable.

The interviewees also try to exert control over the algorithm by “curating” and “training” it. In the case of the interviewees, this is done, for example, by skipping certain types of content or by using the “not interested” or “interested” buttons:

I just scroll past them because I know that if I look at them, I'll just get more of them. I've trained my algorithms quite well I have to say and they mostly show me positive things. (P4)

So I've curated my social media pretty well to suit me. (P6)

Sometimes in Instagram you have like the option to say I'm not interested. -- It's more like editing the content you see and more to your liking. (P11)

In the interviewees' descriptions, algorithms appear as systems that users can influence to some extent but cannot fully control – according to the interviewees, algorithms can, for example, be curated, trained, or customized to better suit one's own tastes. At the same time, this highlights algorithms as “learning” agents with whom the user is in constant interaction. However, this relationship is not unambiguous; rather, it involves clear contradictions. Some users feel that interacting with the feedback functions of platforms can also increase the amount of information the platforms have about them:

I felt like this was just another way to find out more about me... so I try not to use these functions so much. Which is like a weird... kind of fight with the algorithm. (P15)

This creates a paradoxical situation for users: “increasing control” can simultaneously strengthen the platforms' ability to influence them and gather more information about them. The user tries to manage the algorithm, but at the same time becomes more visible to it. Thus, “managing” algorithms does not mean controlling them completely, but rather continuously adapting to their logic. These practices are linked to users' cognitive and emotional self-regulation processes and also involve contradictory dimensions, which are examined in more detail in subsection 7.3.6.

7.3.5 Cognitive and emotional self-regulation

The data revealed that not all coping strategies are technical or practical in nature. Some of the interviewees also describe ways of regulating the effects of social media on a cognitive and emotional level. This may involve, for example, observing one's own reactions and consciously reflecting on why certain content or the use of social media in general sometimes evokes strong emotions:

If I notice that something is really triggering for me, I need to look in the mirror so to say. (P13)

Descriptions of this kind emphasize that the user does not merely react to the content they see, but also observes their own reaction as if from the outside (metacognition). Attention thus shifts away

from the content itself toward one's own experience and the factors underlying it, which in turn can help the user put their own reactions into perspective and mitigate their impact. Some of the interviewees also described consciously reminding themselves of the nature of social media content:

I remind myself that life isn't perfect... it's very much talking to myself. (P14)

This can be seen as a form of cognitive reframing, in that the user is consciously seeking to challenge the perceptions and impressions that social media has created and place them in a more realistic frame of reference. This form of internal dialogue can be seen as way in which the user is seeking to preserve their own internal emotional balance in situations where the content might otherwise lead to, for example, comparisons or feelings of inadequacy.

A third example that emerged from the data was the effort to avoid overload by regulating the number of simultaneous stimuli and avoiding multitasking:

If I'm home alone, watching TV, and I notice that I'm picking up my phone, I pause the TV so that I don't give my brain two sources of dopamine at the same time. (P4)

This excerpt shows how the user consciously attempts to reduce the number of simultaneous stimuli, suggesting an understanding that a constant, multi-sensory barrage of stimuli may, for example, impair concentration and increase mental load. Here, self-regulation focuses on dividing attention and managing cognitive load.

What these strategies have in common is that they shift the focus of coping from external solutions toward internal processes. Instead of having to make concrete changes to their environment or social media use, users strive to change their own way of interpreting, experiencing, and processing social media content. This kind of reflective self-regulation is a skill that develops over time and helps users relate social media content to their own lives and knowledge. It is important to note, however, that these strategies do not occur in isolation from other strategies. Instead, the data shows that users combine various means of regulation and coping depending on the situation. Coping thus appears in the material as a multidimensional and overlapping process rather than as individual, separate solutions.

7.3.6 Ambivalent coping: social media as a form of escape

Previous sections have already indicated that the use of social media is not without its contradictions, and that forms of self-regulation and coping are not straightforward; rather, they can simultaneously involve both beneficial and burdensome aspects. For many users, social media serves simultaneously as a source of stress and a means of escaping stressful situations:

I notice that if I have a stressful situation or am feeling down, then the phone is kind of like a coping mechanism... for a moment you can escape from your real life situation. (P8)

Something interesting that I have pointed out regarding that is that in periods where I want to be less connected to reality... I tend to go on social media more. (P12)

Social media can offer temporary relief from the pressures and challenges of everyday life, but at the same time, its use can also paradoxically increase overload and reinforce negative emotions:

Then you might escape to social media, which isn't necessarily a good thing. Doomscrolling can be an alternative to confronting your own thoughts. (P9)

If you're like sad, you would like a confirmation of your emotion, but then the algorithm will show you more sad videos, so you will get even more sad. (P14)

In these situations, coping does not necessarily solve the problem, but may even reinforce it. This highlights a key contradiction: what feels good and relieving in the moment may later increase feelings of unease. The data also describes situations in which social media use serves as a means of regulating restlessness, stress, or feelings of boredom. In these cases, users do not consciously seek out specific content, but use social media as a means of diverting their attention away from an unpleasant state of mind.

This, in turn, can lead to situations where users switch from one application to another without a clear goal or objective. Instead of interrupting their use, users continue using different platforms as if shifting their attention automatically:

If you're in such a hectic state... you might just get stuck in a loop where you close one app and open another, and then open another, and then it just keeps going round and round.

(P9)

In descriptions such as these, it can be seen that social media use appears to be a form of regulating restlessness. Switching from one app to another provides momentary relief, but does not actually resolve or improve the feeling of stress or unease. On the contrary, use may continue for longer and become even more aimless. The interviewees themselves recognize this contradiction and the fact that switching apps brings momentary relief but does not necessarily interrupt the stressful experience:

Yeah, sometimes you just have to change the app... or just turn off the phone completely.

(P1)

This suggests that coping strategies are not always clearly successful or unsuccessful, but rather vary depending on the situation and can sometimes even perpetuate feelings of vulnerability – in which case the vicious circle remains and continues. Vulnerability, then, isn't just about what people do on social media, but also about how much effort it takes to try to keep those interactions under control.

The data shows that the coping and digital self-regulation of the young adults in this study consists of a diverse and colorful set of strategies, ranging from withdrawing from social media to more subtle ways of modifying their own user experience in everyday life (see Table 7). The strategies can focus on the user's own actions, the technological environment, and the emotions evoked by social media. At the same time, the data highlights the ambivalent nature of coping strategies. Although many users actively seek to regulate their own social media use in various ways, these efforts take place in an environment where structures are often designed to encourage continuous use. For this reason, digital self-regulation appears in the data as a constant negotiation between user agency, existing platform structures, and the restoration of emotional balance, always depending on the user's unique situation.

Table 7. Young adults' coping and digital self-regulation strategies in social media use

Coping strategy	How it appears in data	Purpose
Withdrawal and disengagement	Social media use is completely interrupted, for example, by putting the phone away, deleting the app, or taking longer breaks from it.	Disconnect from overwhelming situations and restore a sense of control.
Increasing friction	Social media use is deliberately made less smooth, for example by using a browser instead of an app, a black-and-white filter on the screen, or disabling notifications.	Reduces impulsive use and weakens the appeal of social media.
Physical distancing and everyday routines	The phone is moved out of sight or completely out of reach, for example by moving it to another room or place.	Prevents automatic or reflexive use of phone and social media.
Content and algorithm management	Users may, for example, delete accounts they follow, mute content, report it, or attempt to influence algorithms by skipping certain types of content.	Edit social media content streams to make them less burdensome or negative.
Cognitive and emotional self-regulation	Users monitor their own feelings, pause to reflect on their reactions, or critically evaluate social media content.	Protect their own mood and put the effects of social media into perspective in relation to their own lives.
Ambivalent coping	Social media is consciously used as a means of escaping stress or negative emotions.	Provide momentary emotional relief, even though use may simultaneously increase the burden.

8 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to a more critical understanding of contemporary social media environments by examining how overload and situational digital vulnerability emerge in young adults' everyday social media use and how young users seek to navigate these environments and maintain a sense of control over their engagement. The following subsections examine the results of this study in light of the theory presented earlier. The subsections are organized according to the study's research questions and main themes as follows: (1) Social media overload in a marketing-saturated environment, (2) from overload to situational digital vulnerability, and (3) coping and digital self-regulation in the context of social media.

Since the study employed an iterative and empirically-based approach that allowed for movement between empirical observations and theoretical interpretations, the analysis resulted in the development of a revised theoretical framework (see Figure 3). This framework is elaborated upon in light of the results and theory in subsection 8.4.

8.1 Social media overload in a marketing-saturated environment

Previous research has examined social media overload, particularly from the perspective of information overload. According to the classic definition by Eppler and Mengis (2004), overload occurs in a situation where there is an abundance of information presented to an individual compared to their processing capabilities. In later research, the concept of overload has been expanded specifically to digital environments, where information flows are continuous, and users' attention is divided among multiple simultaneous and existing stimuli and triggers (Bawden & Robinson 2009; Roetzel 2019). In particular, in relation to social media, overload has been studied to happen in three key dimensions: information overload, social overload, and system feature overload (Karr-Wisniewski & Lu 2010; Maier et al. 2015; Fu et al. 2020).

The results of this study support this classification, as the interviewees repeatedly described situations in which the constant flow and nature of the content, social interaction, and the technical features of the platforms all combined to create an experience of an overwhelming media environment. At the same time, however, the results deepen previous research by showing that these dimensions do not occur in isolation in users' experiences. Instead, they form a holistic experiential space in which the forms of overload reinforce one another. For example, algorithmic

content filtering can increase information overload by constantly offering new content and information, while social interaction creates pressure to remain active and reachable to others. In such a situation, the user simultaneously faces cognitive, social, and technological demands that they are expected to meet.

This finding complements previous research on social media overload. According to Roetzel (2019, 484), overload does not arise solely from the volume of information, but also from its continuity, complexity, and inconsistency. The data from this study supports this view but also shows that, in the context of social media, overload is strongly linked to the structural endlessness of the platforms. In the interviewees' descriptions, social media appears as a dynamic environment where there is no clear end or beginning to content, suggestions, influencers, and products for purchase. Usage thus unfolds as a continuous stream, in which the user must decide for themselves when to stop engaging.

The results of this study also suggest that social media overload cannot be viewed entirely in isolation from the commercial logic of these platforms. Although the interviewees did not usually cite individual advertisements as the direct cause of overload, marketing appeared in the data rather as a structural element permeating the platforms' operations. For many interviewees, advertising even appeared to be a self-evident part of using the platforms – a sort of “part of the package” or an acceptable trade-off for being able to use the service for free. For some, it appeared as neutral background noise that was easy to ignore. This finding supports earlier research on platforms, in which marketing is understood more as an embedded operational logic within platforms than as a separate content category (van Dijck 2013; van Dijck et al. 2018; Gillespie 2014). At the same time, however, the data shows that it is precisely this normalization that is a central part of the nature and functioning of a marketing-saturated media environment. When commercial content blends with entertainment, social interaction, and everyday content consumption, its impact is no longer based on individual stimuli, but specifically on continuous and often unnoticed exposure (Zuboff 2019).

Such an environment can also be conceived as part of a larger commercial – and marketing-saturated – digital infrastructure, in which users' attention is considered a key economic resource (Davenport & Beck 2001; van Dijck 2013, 16–17). The logic of surveillance capitalism as described by Zuboff (2019), emphasizes that digital platforms seek to collect and utilize user data in order to obtain ever more accurate information regarding their choices and actions. This was also supported by the data of this study in which algorithms were often described as systems that learn users'

preferences and guide content accordingly. The systems were even described as human-like actors that people wanted to influence or did not want to “know too much.”

Based on this, social media overload is not merely an individual experience, but rather a structural feature of digital platform environments. Overload thus arises in situations where the platforms’ technological infrastructure, social interaction, and marketing communications collectively increase the demands placed on the user’s attention. As long as the development of social media platforms is based on the continuous optimization of user attention, the expansion of content volume, and the logic of algorithmic engagement, overload does not appear as an isolated exception but rather as a structural feature of these environments. Social media overload can thus be seen as a natural consequence of the platform economy, in which user attention serves as a key object of competition (Beer 2017; Zuboff 2019).

8.2 From overload to situational digital vulnerability

In research on consumer vulnerability, vulnerability is currently understood primarily as a situational state arising from the asymmetry between the individual and the environment (Baker et al. 2005, 134). According to Hill and Sharman (2020, 551), consumers become vulnerable particularly in situations where their ability to utilize key resources is weakened by environmental structures.

The results of this study indicate that social media overload can function precisely as such a situational mechanism. In the interview data, overload often appears as a kind of trigger for situations in which social media use becomes increasingly difficult to control. In these situations, users describe experiences where usage continues longer than originally intended, triggers strong emotional reactions that were neither sought nor desired, or feels at odds with their own goals and values. This finding supports the perspective on situations of consumer vulnerability but extends it to the context of the digital environment. The results suggest that in digital environments, vulnerability can arise particularly in situations where the user’s cognitive, emotional, and social resources are simultaneously put to the test.

In the data, situational digital vulnerability does not appear as a single, isolated experience, but is constructed through several intertwined experiential mechanisms. The first of these relates to a diminished sense of agency. According to Bandura (2001), agency refers to an individual’s ability

to act purposefully and influence their own behavior. In the context of social media, this diminished sense of agency manifests in situations where usage no longer feels like a fully conscious decision but begins to resemble automatic or reflexive behavior. For example, interviewees described situations where browsing continued longer than they had planned or where opening an app happened almost without their noticing. These findings support LaRose, Lin, and Eastin's (2003, 228) view that repeated media use can become routine behavior, thereby diminishing the individual's sense of control. However, the data from this study suggests that in the context of social media, it is not merely a matter of individual habits, but rather a certain type of environmental context.

Another mechanism relates to affective reactions and emotional exposure via social media. Previous research has shown that social media content can elicit strong emotional reactions, for example through social comparison, when users encounter other people's curated representations of their lives, achievements, or appearances (Vogel et al. 2014, 206; Tandoc et al. 2015). However, emotional strain is not limited to comparison but is also linked to the so-called incidental exposure phenomenon, in which users are exposed in their content streams to information they have not actively sought out or chosen to view (Lai 2023, 652; Thorson 2020, 1068). Previous research has examined the phenomenon of incidental exposure particularly in the context of news and political content, but the same logic extends broadly to other content types encountered in algorithmically curated content streams as part of everyday media use (Lim et al. 2025, 514). The data from this study supports this observation: the interviewees described situations in which unexpected content – such as war videos, polarized discussions, or aggressive comment threads – triggered immediate emotional reactions and could alter their emotional state in a matter of seconds. In such situations, affective reactions can be triggered before conscious reflection (Zajonc 1980; Kahneman 2011), and the algorithmic content logic of social media can reinforce this phenomenon, as engagement-maximizing systems often highlight emotionally charged content that elicits reactions and extends usage time (Milli et al. 2025; Fischer et al. 2022). Thus, users may be repeatedly exposed to content that evokes strong emotions and increases their experience of the emotional intensity of social media.

The third key mechanism relates to social interaction. Research on social media has emphasized that digital platforms are a central part of today's interaction infrastructure (van Dijck 2013, 16–17). For this reason, disengaging from social media is not merely a technical or individual decision, but also a social choice that can affect an individual's ability to be part of their own social networks,

maintain them, or develop them. This is particularly true for young adults, as this stage of life is often associated with a strong need to maintain connections with peers and to construct one's own identity in relation to others (Prensky 2001; Zhang et al. 2016; Nesi et al. 2018). In the context of social media, constant presence and availability can become an unspoken norm that users strive to follow. This is particularly evident in the FoMO phenomenon (Fear of Missing Out), where staying constantly connected is linked to the fear of missing out on social events, conversations, trends, and other shared experiences (Przybylski et al. 2013, 1841). The data from this study supports these findings and suggests that disengagement from social media use is no longer linked solely to personal self-regulation, but also to social negotiation with others. Thus, usage is not sustained solely by the appeal of the content or platform, but also by the need to remain part of something – conversations, events, opportunities, and peer networks.

The fourth key mechanism relates to the algorithmic structure of platforms and the associated experience of asymmetrical agency. Beer (2017, 4) has argued that in the era of datafication, the agency of humans and algorithms is increasingly intertwined, meaning that digital activity is increasingly constructed through interaction with systems that analyze user data and adapt content based on it. In the data of this study, algorithms often appear as nearly human-like agents that “learn,” “know,” or “understand” users’ preferences and guide content accordingly. Interviewees described algorithms as systems that guide both content and their behavior in ways over which individual users have only limited influence. This resonates with platform research, in which algorithms are indeed central actors in the attention economy: they not only distribute content but also define it and strive to keep users on the platform for as long as possible (Gillespie 2014, Bucher 2017). Thus, situational digital vulnerability is constructed, at least in part, as the experience that the user's own influence over their exposure and actions is more limited than the algorithmic control of the platforms (human vs. machine).

The fifth mechanism relates to the experience of time passing and the sense of meaning associated with social media use. The interviewees described situations in which social media use took time away from other activities that they personally considered more meaningful. Although the use might momentarily feel entertaining or relaxing, it was often viewed quite critically in hindsight. After prolonged scrolling, a sense emerged that time had passed without a clear purpose or lasting memory of what content the user had actually seen. This is in line with, among others, Meinhardt et al. (2025), Lane et al. (2021), and Rixen et al. (2023), who have studied the regretful effects of social media scrolling in people. Such experiences are linked to a broader discussion on the role of

digital media in life and its temporal effects, which has shown that social media can divert time away from other activities and that media use can become routine and part of everyday life (LaRose et al. 2003). The data from this study suggests that situational digital vulnerability can also manifest such a reflective experience: during use, the activity may feel harmless and automatic, but in retrospect, the use appears contradictory in relation to the user's own values, goals, and conceptions of a meaningful life and use of time.

When these mechanisms are placed within the broader context of the platform economy, the significance of digital vulnerability becomes more apparent. Social media platforms are not neutral communication tools, but rather systems that shape behavior (van Dijck 2013; Gillespie 2014; van Dijck et al. 2018). Algorithmic personalization, infinite scroll, and engagement-enhancing user interfaces collectively create an environment where the focus of optimization is on users' attention, emotions, and sensations, as well as their actions. This observation also resonates with Zuboff's (2019) analysis of surveillance capitalism. The interviewees' descriptions of algorithms as "smarter" actors that exploit users' psychological vulnerabilities reflect the asymmetry between users and platform companies. The algorithmic environment not only reacts to users' actions but also anticipates and shapes them in ways that turn resistance into a continuous negotiation.

A key finding is that social media overload and situational digital vulnerability do not appear in the data as a linear process, but rather as a mutually reinforcing cycle. This dynamic, circular relationship is depicted in the revised theoretical framework (see Figure 3). Overload impairs self-regulation and judgment and increases reactivity, which in turn makes users more prone to drifting into social media use. This drift further increases exposure to content and reinforces the experience of overload. The process of social media use thus becomes a much more dynamic experiential process, in which control and vulnerability fluctuate from one situation to another.

8.3 Coping and digital self-regulation in the context of social media

Although the use of social media can give rise to situational experiences of vulnerability, the results of this study clearly show that users are not passive actors. Instead, young adults actively take cues about risks and develop various strategies to manage their relationship with social media. This finding is very much in line with previous research on digital self-regulation. LaRose (2010) has argued that media use can be viewed from the perspective of self-regulation, in which individuals actively seek to regulate their own behavior in relation to digital environments. Similarly, Turel

(2015) has emphasized that users develop various coping strategies to manage the stress associated with technology use and to restore a sense of control over their own experiences.

The results of this study show that such strategies can target both behavior and the digital environment. For example, interviewees described deleting apps, managing notifications, physically moving the phone out of sight, and taking deliberate breaks as ways to interrupt impulsive or automatic use. At the same time, some strategies targeted the platform environment itself, such as following fewer accounts or only specific ones, limiting the content feed, or attempting to influence algorithms. Such practices can be interpreted as attempts to make the digital environment less burdensome and to restore the user's sense of agency, which is in line with, for example, Büchi et al. (2019) and Qahri-Saremi (2016), as well as with the views presented by Labrecque et al. (2013).

However, the results challenge the simplistic view of coping as a solution to social media stress. The interviewees' descriptions suggest instead that coping appears as a complex, ongoing, and situational negotiation in which individuals balance their own needs, emotions, and the structural demands of digital platforms. Coping thus does not manifest as isolated solutions but as a process that is constantly taking shape. This observation aligns with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) process-oriented view, in which coping is seen more as a dynamic and context-dependent activity.

In the data, most coping strategies (such as deleting apps, limiting usage time, or consciously reflecting on one's own behavior) often appeared to be solutions that worked in the moment and were well-suited to a specific situation, but rarely as long-term solutions. Interviewees repeatedly described returning to social media, even after taking a break lasting from months to a year or completely disconnecting from the platform. They attributed their return primarily to social expectations, practical needs (such as responding to messages or searching for information), and daily routines and habits. This continuous cycle of withdrawal and return suggests that coping does not eliminate vulnerability, but rather manages it momentarily. This finding supports previous research in which digital self-regulation is understood as a continuous process rather than an attainable state of balance that would remain stable (Turel & Qahri-Saremi 2016; Bucher 2017; Wolfers & Utz 2022).

The results also challenge the commonly held view of individual responsibility, in which managing social media is presented primarily as a matter of awareness, willpower, or self-discipline. Although reflectivity and conscious regulation emerged in the data as important resources that can be

developed, the interviewees also described how difficult it is to maintain these practices in environments designed to maximize user engagement. This tension is again in line with critical platform studies, where the discourse on digital well-being has been criticized for emphasizing individual responsibility while the structural power of platforms receives less attention or is overlooked (Zuboff 2019; van Dijck et al. 2018). In this light, coping does not appear as mastery of technology but as a balancing act within an asymmetrical power relationship between users and platform companies.

The data also highlights the ambivalent nature of coping. For many of the interviewees, social media served simultaneously as both a source of stress and a means of escaping it. Especially in emotionally stressful situations, the interviewees described turning easily to scrolling, short videos, or other media content to find momentary relief. At the same time, however, the interviewees recognized that such use could increase exhaustion, anxiety, or a sense of losing control, which they found very contradictory. This dual role reflects previous research on emotional coping with digital media (e.g., Beaudry & Pinsonneault 2005; Wolfers & Schneider 2021; Stenseng et al. 2025), in which avoidance and emotion regulation are intertwined in complex ways.

It is also worth noting that most of the interviewees did not seek to disconnect from social media entirely. Instead, they expressed a desire to use social media in the future in a more sustainable, mindful, and meaningful way. Such efforts often appeared as ethical or even existential projects: a desire to be more present in one's daily life, to act more authentically or in line with one's own values, or to react less impulsively to digital stimuli. Coping was thus not limited to mere technical regulatory measures, but was more broadly connected to the individual themselves – their values, identity, and experience of agency. It is not only a question of limiting the use, but also of trying to use the social media in a manner that feels authentic and relevant to the users. At the same time, the data shows how these efforts are constantly put to the test due to the evolving features offered by the platforms.

8.4 Revised conceptual framework

The study's original theoretical framework (see, Figure 2) conceptualized the relationship between a marketing-saturated social media environment, overload, vulnerability, and coping as a relatively linear progression. This structure provided a clear analytical starting point and helped to organize the key aspects of the phenomenon. However, the empirical results indicate that, in the participants'

experiences, the phenomenon unfolds in a more complex and dynamic manner than the linear model is fully capable of capturing.

Based on the results, social media overload did not appear as a single phase, but rather as a persistent background condition that permeates the entire platform environment. Experiences of vulnerability did not form a single, clear consequence phase, but rather varied depending on situations, emotional states, and contexts. Coping strategies, in turn, did not signify a final solution or endpoint, but rather a continuous process of adaptation and balancing that could generate new tensions or reshape the user's relationship with the platform in new ways.

These findings suggest that it makes more sense to view the phenomenon as a dynamic, circular process that is structurally embedded within a commercial ecosystem. Based on these empirical findings, the original linear framework is refined and redefined as follows in the Figure 3 below.

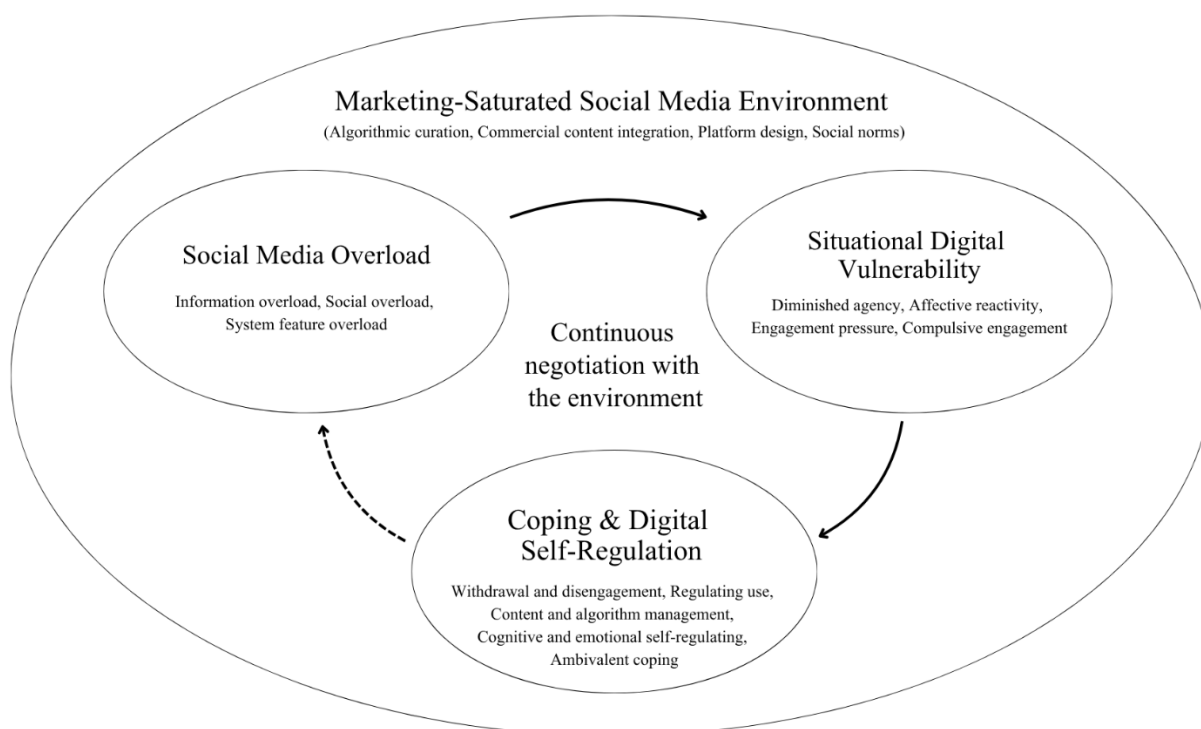


Figure 3. A revised conceptual framework conceptualizing social media use as a continuous negotiation of agency within a marketing-saturated ecosystem

The outermost layer of this framework is that of a marketing-saturated social media environment, wherein algorithmic curation, commercial logic, and the attention economy dictate the nature and form of interaction and visibility. Moreover, various social norms have emerged throughout the

development and lifecycle of social media, both in relation to commercial activities and other forms of social interaction, which also form the underlying layer for the model. This is essentially a structural context that is not within the direct control of individual users.

In this environment, the users are subject to a state of social media overload. This overload does not manifest as a single event, but rather as a continuous stream of information, social expectations, and technological stimuli in forms such as endless new posts, messages, comments, and system updates. However, when an individual's available resources are insufficient to manage this overload, it can, in certain situations, manifest as digital situational vulnerability. Vulnerability in turn, can then manifest as a state of diminished agency, affective reactivity, engagement pressure, and compulsive engagement or use of the social media platform itself.

Since users do not tend to remain passive in the face of these kinds of situations, the experience of vulnerability taps into the mechanisms of coping and digital self-regulation. Whereas coping refers to the specific strategies and methods that users adopt to cope with the stress and restore a sense of control, digital self-regulation is a broader process in which an individual, consciously or unconsciously, seeks to modify their own behavior, exposure, and reactions within an algorithmic environment.

The entire framework is embedded with the notion of negotiation. The use of social media is not a linear cause-and-effect relationship but a continuous and multidimensional balancing act between individual agency, social norms in social media, and commercial structures. At the heart of the entire study, therefore, is the idea of negotiated agency: users are neither entirely passive objects of the structures nor entirely autonomous agents but, rather, the agency of the users is constructed through continuous interplay with the marketing-saturated ecosystem.

9 Contributions and implications

After discussing the results, this chapter moves on to consider the broader academic and societal significance of the study. First, the chapter discusses what the study contributes to the existing academic discourse on social media, its perceived burden, and digital vulnerability. In addition, the practical implications of the study are assessed. Finally, this chapter will explore the study's key limitations and provide guidelines regarding future research.

Although the aim of this study is by no means to propose normative solutions, the results nevertheless highlight several key challenges related to the functioning and design of contemporary social media environments. These findings are also essential to the examination of the practical implications presented in this chapter.

9.1 Theoretical contributions

This study complements the existing research literature by expanding current understandings of social media overload, consumer vulnerability, and coping and self-regulation strategies in digital environments. Rather than seeking to replace existing theoretical perspectives, the study builds upon them, synthesizing and deepening our understanding of how these phenomena interact and intertwine in marketing-saturated and algorithmically mediated social media environments. Previous research on social media overload provides a strong theoretical foundation for explaining why social media use can become cognitively taxing and psychologically stressful for individuals. In particular, research on overload has demonstrated very convincingly how excessive demands—regarding information, interaction, and system features alike—can exceed users' cognitive capacity and lead to stress, exhaustion, and withdrawal (Eppler & Mengis 2004; Maier et al. 2015; Whelan et al. 2020). These findings form a key starting point for understanding the burdensome experiences associated with social media.

However, the results of this study show that while information overload explains a significant portion of users' experiences, it alone is not sufficient to capture the complexity, emotional tone, or current state of social media use. Nor is it sufficient on its own to explain the contradictions in marketing-saturated and algorithmically driven environments. The interviewees' descriptions suggest that their experiences often extend beyond cognitive load and include, for example, feelings of diminished agency, affective reactivity, ambivalence, and difficulty disconnecting from social

media. These phenomena cannot be explained solely by the volume of information or interaction. In this sense, overload serves as a necessary but insufficient concept for describing the range of problematic experiences associated with social media use.

This study builds upon the research tradition addressing consumer vulnerability, with Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005) at the forefront of this body of work, as they redefined the concept of consumer vulnerability in an entirely new way. Vulnerability is no longer seen as relying solely on individual characteristics, but rather as a situational state that is activated when environmental demands exceed the resources available to the individual (Baker et al. 2005; Hill & Sharma 2020; Basu 2023). By combining this perspective with research focused on digital and algorithmically mediated environments (e.g., Helberger et al. 2021; Lwin et al. 2020), this study develops the concept of situational digital vulnerability as a complementary theoretical framework alongside social media overload.

Whereas the literature on overload emphasizes primarily cognitive constraints and excessive demands, situational digital vulnerability as a concept highlights how overload becomes meaningful and potentially harmful to the user in situations where agency on social media is weakened and the sense of control is undermined. The results indicate that vulnerability does not arise automatically from mere exposure or intensity of use, but rather in unique situations where the user's own intentions, self-regulation goals, and actual behavior are no longer aligned. This helps explain why users may experience anxiety, frustration, or a vague sense of unease even when they are well aware of the platforms' operational logic and possess high digital literacy.

The study also offers a theoretical contribution to the understanding of agency and control, especially in the context of social media. In the past literature, agency has often been portrayed as a somewhat dichotomous phenomenon: users are generally viewed either as empowered, conscious, and autonomous agents, or alternatively as subjects guided and constrained by platforms (Labrecque et al. 2013; Zuboff 2019). However, the results of this study point to a more complex picture of agency. Users often experience partial, unstable, and fluctuating agency: they may reflect on their own use, demonstrate even strong resistance through various means, and employ different coping strategies, yet still end up acting automatically, reactively, or contrary to their own intentions or values from time to time.

This tension is particularly evident in phenomena such as doomscrolling or the routine checking of apps, in which individuals claim to continue engaging in the behavior and use despite having consciously attempted to desist. What is perhaps important to note, however, is that these experiences should not be seen as reflective of any lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the young adults, but rather as a reflection of particular circumstances in which the platform environment and learned human habits create a context in which purposeful behavior is undermined. This diminished agency, in particular, seems to be the manner in which social media overload can be seen as contributing to the experience of situational digital vulnerability.

Finally, the study also offers a new perspective on the coping literature, challenging in particular linear and solution-focused models of digital self-regulation. Although previous research has identified numerous coping strategies, such as withdrawal, boundary-setting, or technical regulation (Beaudry & Pinsonneault 2005; Maier et al. 2015; Tran & Chen 2024), the results of this study indicate that in the context of social media, coping is generally contradictory, ambivalent, and imperfect—human. The same strategy can simultaneously alleviate and increase stress, and users oscillate repeatedly between withdrawal and return.

Coping should not be understood as a definitive solution to overload and vulnerability in this context, but rather as an ongoing process of negotiation within structurally carefully designed digital environments. In marketing-saturated social media ecosystems, individual coping strategies may restore a sense of control and emotional balance for a moment, but the structural factors that produce overload and vulnerability remain largely unchanged. This finding highlights the limitations of individual-level solutions and underscores the need to examine digital vulnerability and well-being at the systemic and structural levels.

9.2 Practical implications

The key finding of this study is that the stress and vulnerability associated with social media do not arise in a vacuum, nor can they be attributed solely to an individual's media usage habits. Although many young adults actively strive to manage their own social media use, these solutions are generally no more than temporary fixes. Issues of digital well-being should therefore be examined within a broader context, rather than placing the responsibility solely on the individual level. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that it is unrealistic to expect platform companies to significantly restrict practices that are central to their economic success on their own. As long as

current regulatory frameworks permit business models based on maximizing attention, platform companies will also have a strong incentive to exploit these structures.

For this reason, issues related to digital well-being cannot be resolved solely through voluntary measures taken by companies. There is also a need for broader societal discussion, as well as political and regulatory measures that examine the responsibility of social media platforms for user well-being. Decision-makers and education play a major role in this. The goal is not to restrict the use of social media per se, but rather to ensure that digital environments support users' well-being rather than systematically increasing their stress. As artificial intelligence gains more ground and the market becomes increasingly entrenched online, educational organizations, civil society groups, and public actors can play a crucial role, particularly in promoting critical media literacy and clarifying the operating principles of digital platforms. Digital media literacy does not merely refer to technical skills, but also to the ability to recognize the mechanisms of algorithmic influence, critically evaluate content streams, and reflect on one's own media use as part of broader daily life. Such understanding can help users identify situations where social media use begins to undermine their well-being.

The role of decision-makers could involve, for example, enhancing algorithmic transparency, more clearly labeling commercial content on social media, and developing research-based digital well-being programs. In addition, regulatory models can be examined that encourage platform companies to better consider user well-being in service design (e.g., privacy by design, well-being by design, transparency requirements for algorithmic recommendation systems, usage time management tools, or clearer labeling requirements for influencer and native advertising) Such measures may not completely change the operational logic of social media, but they could help balance the perceived asymmetry between users and the platform. The key practical implications of the study for different stakeholder groups are summarized in Table 8.

The study also raises the question of marketing responsibility in social media environments. Traditionally, responsible marketing has been examined primarily from the perspectives of social and environmental responsibility. Discussions emphasize, for example, consideration of diversity and inclusivity, fair treatment of consumers, and issues related to environmental impacts, such as avoiding greenwashing or other misleading communication. These are important perspectives, but in the age of social media, responsible marketing can also relate to the kind of information environment that marketers and marketing practices help to shape. Can marketing also mean taking

responsibility for how much content is produced and how it contributes to the overload of the digital environment (e.g., information pollution)?

Although a sustainability strategy may be reflected, for example, in sustainable supply chains, reporting, or inclusive communication, social media marketing practices can simultaneously increase noise in the information environment by producing large amounts of consumable, reactive content or content that follows algorithmic logic. This can create a clear contradiction between a company's values and marketing practices and their actual implementation. In the digital environment, responsibility can also mean that marketing strives to produce meaningful and high-quality content rather than contributing to the constant growth of the content stream.

This study invites marketers to consider responsibility from a new perspective: responsible marketing can begin with the question of what kind of media environment marketing activities are part of. In other words, marketers should consider not only whether a marketing campaign is effective, but also whether it promotes the kind of digital environment in which they themselves would want to operate as users.

Table 8. Key practical implications of the study

<i>Stakeholder</i>	<i>Key finding</i>	<i>Practical implication</i>
Social media platforms	The design of the platforms can increase the load on them.	To develop features that help users manage their media consumption (e.g., algorithm transparency, usage restriction tools, and greater user control over their content feed).
Marketers	Commercial content is integrated into the system and the content stream.	To enhance marketing transparency and take into account the demands of the digital information environment in content production.
Decision- and policymakers	Digital vulnerabilities are also linked to the architecture of platforms.	To promote regulations that increase algorithmic transparency and support users' digital well-being.

Educational institutions	There is a need to support users' understanding of how social media platforms operate.	To strengthen critical digital media literacy and understanding of algorithmic influence.
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Table 8 illustrates how the challenges associated with social media stress are not limited to individual media use, but also extend more broadly to platform design, regulation, and marketing practices.

9.3 Limitations and future research directions

There are several limitations to this study that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. Firstly, it is important to note that all study participants were highly educated young adults. While this allowed for rich, reflective and conceptually structured descriptions of social media use, it at the same time limits the generalizability of the results to broader population groups. Users from different educational backgrounds or with fewer reflective resources may have different experiences and structures of burden and vulnerability related to social media use, which lie outside the scope of this study. The study focused specifically on young adults who are active social media users. While this limitation is theoretically well-founded, it at the same time restricts the applicability of the results to other age groups. Experiences, practices, and forms of vulnerability related to social media use may look different, for example, among younger users or older age groups.

Secondly, the interviewees demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the commercial operating logic, algorithmic structures, and persuasive design of social media platforms. While such knowledge and awareness allows for nuanced and critical reflections on overload and diminished agency, it may also highlight aspects of vulnerability that are consciously recognized and verbalized in the study. Experiences in which overload, loss of control, or emotional strain remain unrecognized or become more normalized may therefore be underrepresented. Furthermore, the data is based on the interviewees' own descriptions and interpretations of their social media use. The results thus reflect how participants structure and make sense of their own experiences in retrospect, rather than direct observations of actual usage situations. Previous research has shown that individuals' perceptions of their own digital media use may differ from their actual usage habits (e.g., Parry et al. 2021). While not diminishing the value of the experiential data, the present study

is thus primarily an analysis of the interviewees' subjective meaning-making of social media use, not an analysis of objective use.

Furthermore, the most significant limitation of the study relates to the selection of the research participants. The preliminary questions were used to select the research interviewees, who were those who had themselves identified social media use as problematic or who had experienced related vulnerability. However, this methodological solution inevitably excludes users who do not find social media burdensome or who do not interpret their own experiences through the lens of vulnerability. At the same time, however, this limitation is closely linked to the theoretical lens of the study. In research on consumer vulnerability, particularly in the literature emphasizing situational perspectives, vulnerability is understood as a subjective experience rather than a characteristic of the individual defined from the outside. From this perspective, vulnerability cannot be defined solely on the basis of the researcher's or external criteria, but must also be identified and structured based on the individual's own experiences. For this reason, the use of preliminary screening questions can be considered methodologically justified when planning the research strategy. This allowed us to reach participants who themselves recognized situations of vulnerability related to their own social media use. The aim of the study is therefore not to describe all social media users, but to examine the situations and mechanisms in which vulnerability is experienced and recognized from the individual's own perspective.

Finally, the results of the study are linked to a specific temporal, cultural, and platform-specific context. The interviewees' descriptions were often linked to specific social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat. Although this reflects the current media environment of young adults, the results are partly tied to the specific operational logic and user interface solutions of these platforms that existed at the time the interviews were conducted. Social media environments and their characteristics are changing rapidly, which means that the results cannot be considered timeless.

In the future, it would be useful to examine situational digital vulnerability through longitudinal studies and more diverse and heterogeneous participant groups in order to gain a deeper understanding of the variability of the phenomenon in different contexts. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into how the significance and usage patterns of social media change, for example, at different stages of life (e.g., entering the workforce, starting a family). In addition, qualitative research could be complemented by quantitative research methods, such as examining

how perceived digital vulnerability relates to actual social media usage patterns and time spent on social media. In the future, it would also be interesting to examine more closely how different platform structures and design principles influence experiences of situational digital vulnerability. Platforms based heavily on commercial logic could be compared, for example, to platform models operating on the principles of “well-being by design” or “privacy by design.” Such a comparison could offer a deeper understanding of how different technological and economic design solutions affect users’ experiences of burden and agency in digital environments.

10 Conclusions

The social media landscape has changed significantly over the past two decades. We have come a long way from niche online communities to large digital ecosystems that shape everyday communication, information sharing, entertainment, and commercial interaction. The varied trajectory of social media's development has also reshaped the marketing landscape. Until relatively recently, marketing research was still debating how traditional marketing and digital marketing differ from one another and what their relationship is. In today's media environment, such a distinction appears to be of diminishing relevance: social media is a central marketing environment, and at the same time, marketing communication has become integrated into everyday digital interaction. In this sense, marketing and social media are currently in a symbiotic relationship with one another.

At the same time, users are increasingly aware of the commercial and algorithmic mechanisms underlying social media. This has raised new questions about the direction in which social media is evolving and how these environments shape users' experiences, well-being, and daily lives. In recent years, there has indeed been a growing interest in research on the stressfulness and well-being impacts of social media. However, previous studies have often examined these phenomena either through the lens of technological features or individual characteristics. Although these perspectives have greatly increased our understanding of the challenges of social media use, they do not fully capture how experiences of overload and vulnerability are constructed in users' everyday media use as a multi-level phenomenon involving psychological, social, technological, and economic factors. In this study, the focus was specifically on these everyday situations. Consequently, the purpose of the study was *to contribute to a more critical understanding of contemporary social media environments by examining how overload and situational digital vulnerability emerge in young adults' everyday social media use and how young users seek to navigate these environments and maintain a sense of control over their engagement.*

When considering the research strategy, a qualitative and interpretive research approach was ultimately chosen as the methodology, as it is particularly well-suited to examining phenomena that cannot be separated from their social and technological context. This methodology guided every stage of the research, from data collection to analysis and the final structuring of the work. The empirical data was collected in October–December 2025 through semi-structured in-depth interviews, of which 16 were ultimately conducted. The analysis proceeded in an exploratory and

iterative manner, moving back and forth between theory and empirical data, much like a dialogue. Although the study drew on a strong body of prior literature on the phenomena under investigation, the observations emerging from the data itself guided the progression of the analysis and the refinement of concepts. As a result of this process, an updated conceptual framework for the study was ultimately formulated, which structures the relationships between the phenomena of the study in a more multidimensional way.

The main findings of the research suggest that the concept of social media overload is not, in the eyes of social media users, a phenomenon related solely to the volume of information or the amount of time spent using social media. Instead, overload gradually develops in everyday media use situations where several factors of the social media environment overlap, sometimes in negative ways. The seemingly endless stream of content, social interactions, and commercial structures – some of which are embedded within the system – together form a complex whole in which many small stimuli, expectations, and human emotional reactions accumulate and begin to shape the user's experience. At the same time, the study also confirms the finding that users are not passive actors in these kind of situations. Young adults have developed a colorful array of diverse strategies to regulate their relationship with social media, ranging from curating content streams to taking extended breaks from social media, or engaging in very conscious reflection on their own lives and the role of social media in them now or in the future. One of the study's key findings, however, was that the impact of these strategies often appears temporary and situational, as users' own attempts at self-regulation take place in environments designed to maximize engagement and attention, as well as within already firmly established digital social norms.

The study's key theoretical contribution is the conceptual refinement of situational digital vulnerability, specifically tailored to the context of social media. The study demonstrates that social media overload alone does not explain the wide range of user experiences on social media; rather, it serves as a background factor in situations where users' sense of agency and control may begin to diminish. In this way, the study expands the literature on social media overload by demonstrating how overload, vulnerability, and coping strategies are intertwined as everyday processes in digital platform environments. Social media overload and people's distress in digital environments do not appear merely as an individual challenge, but also as a question of what kind of digital environments we are building. Although users actively and humanely strive to regulate their relationship with social media, these efforts ultimately take place on platforms whose operations are strongly guided by economic logic and which have already been highly optimized. In this sense,

digital well-being is not merely a skill – or lack thereof – that falls under the individual’s responsibility, but also a broader societal issue.

It remains to be seen how this division of responsibility will ultimately take shape in the age of social media and how digital platforms will evolve in the future. It is possible that the growing debate will lead to stricter regulation and more ethical digital services. At the same time, however, competition in the platform economy may produce even more addictive solutions and new, surprising players. Consumers’ own critical thinking and backlash may also shape the future direction of these environments and, for example, marketing trends.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Complete operationalization table

Research Question	Key concepts	Theme	Question no.	Interview question
RQ1.	Everyday context	Social media use	Q1	Could you start by telling me a little about your everyday life and what role social media plays in it?
RQ1.	Platform use	Social media practices	Q2	Which social media platforms do you use the most, and what do you typically use them for?
RQ1.	Information/social/system feature overload	Overload experiences	Q3	Have you ever felt that social media content or interaction is excessive or overwhelming to you? Can you describe a situation?
RQ1.	Information/social/system feature overload	Effects on wellbeing	Q4	How do situations like these affect you, for example, your mood, concentration, or ability to cope with everyday life?
RQ1.	Marketing saturation	Advertising exposure	Q5	How do you feel about advertising and marketing communications on social media in such stressful situations? Do you feel that it adds to the stress or not?
RQ2.	Vulnerability (agency/control)	Moments of vulnerability	Q6	In these situations, did you feel a loss of control or difficulty disengaging?
RQ2.	Vulnerability (engagement pressure, compulsive engagement)	Platform dynamics	Q7	In these situations, have you felt some kind of pressure to continue using social media?
RQ2.	Vulnerability (affective reactions)	Emotional responses	Q8	What kind of emotions or emotional reactions did you experience?

RQ3.	Coping-strategies	Behavioral responses	Q9	What do you usually do when you feel that social media is overwhelming or feels negative?
RQ3.	Self-regulation	Behavioral change	Q10	Have you consciously changed your social media behavior or developed ways to manage it better? What kind of ways?
RQ3.	Control vs. withdrawal	Strategy types	Q11	Are you trying to control the situation (e.g., limiting use) or withdraw (e.g., taking a break, quitting)? Why is that?
RQ3.	Future orientation / exposure	Desired change	Q12	How would you like your relationship with social media to change in the future? What would help for you to feel better about it, or what would need to change?
RQ3.	Open reflection	Additional insights	Q13	Is there anything else you would like to add about your own experiences or thoughts regarding this topic?

Appendix 2 Interview framework

This interview is being conducted as part of a master's thesis in marketing at the Turku School of Economics. The purpose of this study is to contribute to a more critical understanding of contemporary social media environments by examining how overload and situational digital vulnerability emerge in young adults' everyday social media use and how young users seek to navigate these environments and maintain a sense of control over their engagement.

The interview is confidential, and you cannot be identified based on your answers. The material will not be disclosed to any external parties and will be destroyed after the study has been completed. Do you agree to the interview being recorded and the interview material being used as part of the research report?

Background information:

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation

Theme 1: Social media use and overload experiences (RQ1)

1. Could you start by telling me a little about your everyday life and what role social media plays in it?
2. Which social media platforms do you use the most, and what do you typically use them for?
3. Have you ever felt that social media content or interaction is excessive or overwhelming to you? Can you describe a situation?
4. How do situations like these affect you, for example, your mood, concentration, or ability to cope with everyday life?
5. How do you feel about advertising and marketing communications on social media in such stressful situations? Do you feel that it adds to the stress or not?

Theme 2: Situational digital vulnerability (RQ2)

6. In these situations, did you feel a loss of control or difficulty disengaging?
7. In these situations, have you felt some kind of pressure to continue using social media?
8. What kind of emotions or emotional reactions did you experience?

Theme 3: Coping and self-regulation (RQ3)

9. What do you usually do when you feel that social media is overwhelming or feels negative?
10. Have you consciously changed your social media behavior or developed ways to manage it better? What kind of ways?
11. Are you trying to control the situation (e.g., limiting use) or withdraw (e.g., taking a break, quitting)? Why is that?
12. How would you like your relationship with social media to change in the future? What would help for you to feel better about it, or what would need to change?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add about your own experiences or thoughts regarding this topic?

Appendix 3 Research information and consent request email

The following email was sent to participants prior to the interviews.

Subject: *Invitation to participate in a study*

Dear participant,

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in this Master's thesis research. The study explores how young adults experience social media overload and how they cope with its effects on their well-being.

The interview will take approximately 30–45 minutes, and it can be conducted online (e.g., via Teams or Zoom) or face-to-face. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

The interview will be audio recorded for research purposes only. All the data will be handled confidentially, and any personal identifiers will be removed. Individual participants will not be identifiable in the final report.

Data will be stored securely and used only for the purposes of this research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask before the interview.

If you are still happy to take part, please confirm your consent by replying to this message with “**I agree**” or “**I consent to participate**”.

Thank you for your participation.

Warm regards,

Ella Käppi

Master's Student, University of Turku

ella.e.kappi@utu.fi

Appendix 4 Research data management plan



Research data management plan for students

1. Research data

In the table below, I list all the research data used in the research.

Research data type	Contains personal details/information*	I will gather/produce the data myself	Someone else has gathered/produced the data	Other notes
Data type 1: <i>Interviews</i>	x	x		
Data type 2: <i>Researcher's notes</i>		x		
Data type 3: <i>Transcriptions</i>		x		
Data type 4: <i>Quotations from the interview</i>		x		
Data type 5: <i>Work file of the thesis</i>		x		

* Personal details/information are all information based on which a person can be identified directly or indirectly, for example by connecting a specific piece of data to another, which makes identification possible. For more information about what data is considered personal go to the [Office of the Finnish Data Protection Ombudsman's website](#)

2. Processing personal data in research

I will prepare a Data Protection Notice** and give it to the research participants before collecting data

The controller** for the personal details is the student themselves the university

My data does not contain any personal data

** More information at the university's intranet page, [Data Protection Guideline for Thesis Research](#)

3. Permissions and rights related to the use of data

3.1. Self-collected data

Necessary permissions and how they are acquired





Data type 1: Informed consent was obtained from the study participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the processing and storage of the data, and the use of anonymized quotes in the thesis.

This consent covers the transcription and analysis of the data, as well as the use of anonymized excerpts in the study.

3.2 Data collected by someone else

Rights and licences related to the data

Data type 1: The data was collected by the researcher. The participants in the study have given their consent to the use of the data in the study and to the publication of anonymized results.

No external data, images, or copyrighted materials were used in this study.

4. Storing the data during the research process

Where will you store your data during the research process?

In the university's network drive

In the university-provided Seafile Cloud Service

Other location, please specify:

Data is stored in the university-provided OneDrive service. The university's data storage services will take care of data security and backup files automatically.

5. Documenting the data and metadata

5.1 Data documentation

To document the data, I will use:

A field/research journal

A separate document where I will record the main points of the data, such as changes made, phases of analysis, and significance of variables

A readme file linked to the data that describes the main points of the data

Other, please specify:

I kept a separate document in which I recorded the steps involved in processing the data, the progress of the analysis, and any changes made to the data.

5.2 Data arrangement and integrity

How will you keep your data in order and intact, as well as prevent any accidental changes to it?





I will keep the original data files separate from the data I am using in the research process, so that I can always revert back to the original, if need be.

Version control: I will plan before starting the research how I will name the different data versions and I will adhere to the plan consistently.

I recognise the life span of the data from the beginning of the research and am already prepared for situations, where the data can alter unnoticed, for example while recording, transcribing, downloading, or in data conversions from one file format to another, etc.

5.3 Metadata

Metadata is a description of you research data. Based on metadata someone unfamiliar with your data will understand what it consists of. Metadata should include, among others, the file name, location, file size, and information about the producer of the data. Will you require metadata?

I will save my data into an archive or a repository that will take care of the metadata for me.

I will have to create the metadata myself, because the archive/repository where I am uploading the data requires it.

The data will not be stored in a public repository. However, basic metadata describing the content, structure, and processing of the data will be created and stored alongside the data to ensure its usability and transparency.

I will not store my data into a public archive/repository, and therefore I will not need to create any metadata.

6. Data after completing the research

What happens to your research data, when the research is completed?

I will store some of the data for 5 years, but I will destroy some of it because the original data contains personal information. Identifiable data (such as interview recordings and any identifying information) will be securely destroyed once the study is completed (spring 2026), and no later than 30 June 2026.

Anonymized data, including transcripts, will be retained for a period of five (5) years for potential future research and publication purposes.

All personal data will be handled confidentially and anonymised where possible.



Appendix 5 AI usage declaration of the thesis

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been used to a limited extent to support the thesis process during certain stages of the work. The researcher is fully responsible for the content, interpretations, and conclusions of the work. Artificial intelligence has been used solely as a tool and has not replaced the researcher's own thinking, analysis, or argumentation.

Tools used:

- 1) Microsoft Word Transcription Tool
- 2) Linguee (vocabulary and translation tool)
- 3) OpenAI ChatGPT (a GPT-4-based language model)

The Purpose and Use of Artificial Intelligence:

- 1) The Microsoft Word transcription tool was used for the initial transcription of the interview data. All transcriptions were reviewed and corrected by the researcher to check for errors, omissions, or potential misinterpretations.
- 2) The Linguee service was used to translate or check individual words or sentences, or to look up synonyms. Translations were always checked immediately after translation and, finally, during the project's review phase to ensure they were appropriate in terms of context and the meaning of the research content.
- 3) ChatGPT was used to a limited extent to support the writing process, including checking translations of individual words or expressions (e.g. Finnish idioms), rephrasing individual sentences or short passages, and assisting with the structure and organization of the text, such as evaluating the order of some of the subchapters and the logical flow of the argumentation.

Data Security and Data Handling:

AI tools were used in a secure manner, ensuring that no personal data, other identifiable or confidential information, and/or research data were entered into them. Interview data or other identifiable data were not processed in public AI services. The processing of personal data is described in more detail in the privacy policy (Appendix 4).

Assessment and Verification:

All suggestions generated by artificial intelligence were critically evaluated, and their accuracy was always verified by the researcher. This included, among other things:

- comparison with the scientific literature
- verification of content in relation to the study's theoretical framework
- modification of AI-generated suggestions to align with the researcher's own interpretation and theory

Artificial intelligence has been used solely to support the research process; it has not replaced the analysis or interpretation of the data, nor has it replaced the formulation of the study's key conclusions.