Young People's Mental Health, Social Media and Myth Busting

Exploring the myths and reality of the impact of social media on mental health.

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What are the issues with research in this area?

- Given that social media is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is a scarcity of conclusive evidence.
- Most of the available research is based on self-reported data, which may be subject to errors, and a large portion of the studies concentrate solely on Facebook.
- Also, a large number of these studies are from the US.
- Whilst Facebook is popular with older generations, as we will see from the next slide, it is not as popular with young people aged 11-18.
- All that I am going to present on shows the beginning of an ever-growing area of research. As such, it is imperfect, and should be treated as such. **This, however, shows part of the problem.**

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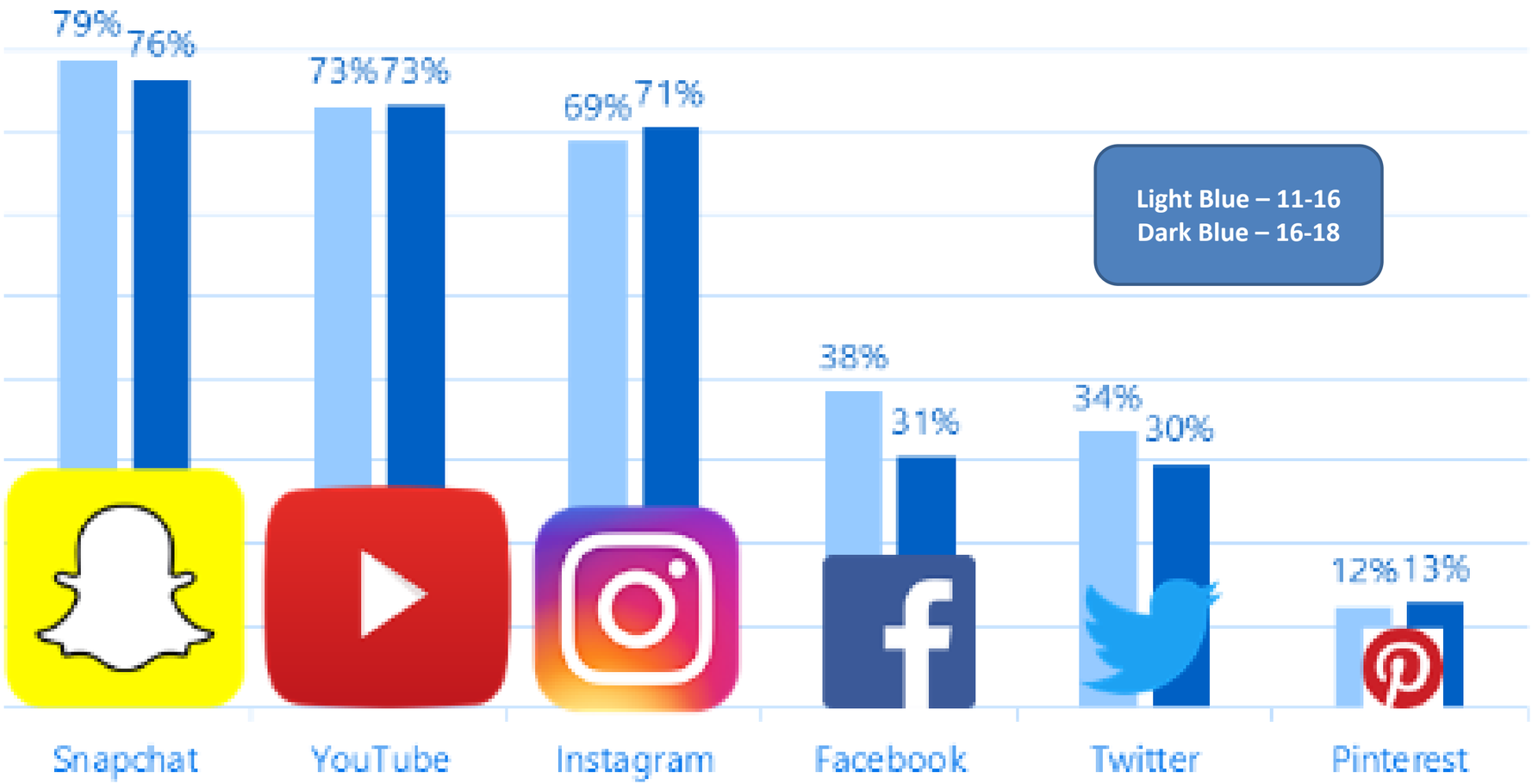
What are the main forms of social media used by young people?



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What are the issues?

- A 2021 report cited the below as the main issues with social media use by young people aged 11 to 18. (Ofcom, 2021)
- Stress
- Mood
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sleep
- Self-Esteem
- Relationships

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The Impact of Social Media on Stress Levels

- **Young people often use social media to vent about everything from friendship issues to politics and everything in between.**
- **The downside to this is that our feeds can become an endless stream of stress (Pew Research Center)**

Research Findings:

- Young women reported being more stressed than young men by social media (Pew Research Center)
- Twitter was found to be a “significant contributor” to young women’s stress levels, as it increased their awareness of other people’s stress (Pew Research Center)
- However, Twitter also acted as a coping mechanism for young women - the more they used it, the less stressed they were (Pew Research Center)
- This effect was not found for young men, who had a more distant relationship with social media (Pew Research Center)
- Overall, social media use was linked to “modestly lower levels” of stress (Pew Research Center)

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The Impact of Social Media on Mood

- **A study by Austrian researchers in 2014 revealed that participants experienced a lower mood after spending 20 minutes on Facebook compared to those who simply browsed the internet. (Kross et al., 2013).**

Research Findings:

- Research by the University of California found that emotions can spread through social media.
- The study analysed over a billion status updates posted by more than 100 million Facebook users between 2009 and 2012.
- The researchers discovered that bad weather led to a 1% increase in negative posts.
- They also found that one negative post by someone in a rainy city resulted in an additional 1.3 negative posts by their friends in dry areas.
- However, positive posts had an even stronger impact, inspiring an average of 1.75 more happy posts.
- It is unclear, though, whether a happy post on social media can truly elevate one's mood (Kramer et al., 2014).

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The Impact of Social Media on Anxiety

- **Some research has shown that increased use of social media can lead to feelings of restlessness, worry, and difficulty sleeping and concentrating, which are symptoms of general anxiety.**

Research Findings:

- A study published in the journal Computers and Human Behaviour found that individuals who use seven or more social media platforms are more than three times as likely as those who use 0-2 platforms to experience high levels of general anxiety.
- However, it is unclear whether social media is the cause of anxiety. Researchers from Babes-Bolyai University in Romania reviewed existing research on the relationship between social anxiety and social networking in 2016 and found mixed results.
- They concluded that further research is necessary to determine the exact relationship between social media use and anxiety in young people. Is it a cause, or a consequence?

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The Impact of Social Media on Depression

- **Research suggests that people who limit their time on social media tend to be happier than those who don't. Studies also indicate that social media may trigger an array of negative emotions in users that contribute to or worsen their depression symptoms.**

Research Findings:

- A study involving over 700 students found that those who reported more negative interactions online also had higher levels of depressive symptoms, such as low mood and feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).
- Another study of 1,700 people found a threefold risk of depression and anxiety among those who used multiple social media platforms (Lin, 2016).
- Reasons for this include cyberbullying, social comparison, and the perception that time spent on social media is a waste.
- A recent Australian study disputed that social media was the cause of depression, but a symptom.
- Researchers are also exploring how social media can be used to diagnose depression and facilitate early intervention.
- For example, a study by Microsoft used Twitter profiles to develop a classifier that can accurately predict depression before it causes symptoms in 7 out of 10 cases (Reece et al., 2017).
- Similarly, researchers from Harvard and Vermont Universities analysed Instagram photos to develop a similar tool with a success rate of 70% (Reece & Danforth, 2017).

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The Impact of Social Media on Sleep

- **When it comes to young people aged 11-18, exposure to artificial lighting from devices such as smartphones and laptops can have negative impacts on sleep quality. Melatonin, a hormone that plays a crucial role in regulating sleep, can be inhibited by this exposure, with blue light being the biggest culprit.**

Research Findings:

- A recent study by researchers from the University of Pittsburgh investigated the link between social media use and sleeping habits.
- The study found that disturbed sleep was associated with social media use, and that blue light emitted from devices may be to blame.
- Interestingly, the frequency of social media use was a better predictor of disturbed sleep than the amount of time spent on social media, suggesting that an obsessive need to constantly check social media may be contributing to the issue.
- The researchers suggest that this phenomenon may be caused by physiological arousal before sleep, and that exposure to bright lights from devices can disrupt circadian rhythms.
- However, they were unable to determine whether social media use was causing disturbed sleep, or if individuals with disturbed sleep were simply spending more time on social media.

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The Impact of Social Media on Self-Esteem

- **Young people aged 11-18 are increasingly affected by social media, which has now overtaken traditional media, such as women's magazines, as a major contributor to self-esteem issues. Many campaigning groups and charities have expressed concern about the use of filters, lighting, and clever angles that create unrealistic and unattainable standards for young people. France are just introducing a law which means any filters etc. must be disclosed on an influencers posts.**

Research Findings:

- According to a survey of 1,500 people conducted by disability charity Scope, over half of social media users feel inadequate when comparing themselves to others.
- Additionally, half of those surveyed reported feeling unattractive due to social media.
- These statistics indicate that social media has a significant impact on young people's self-perception.
- Research by Penn State University in 2016 revealed that viewing other people's selfies can lower self-esteem, as users compare themselves to photos of people at their happiest.
- Studies by the University of Strathclyde, Ohio University, and the University of Iowa also suggest that young women compare themselves negatively to selfies of other women.

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The Impact of Social Media on Relationships

- **Some research has suggested that social media damages relationships.**

Research Findings:

- Research has shown that the mere presence of a phone can disrupt face-to-face conversations and reduce their meaningfulness, as well as decrease feelings of closeness between partners (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013).
- Moreover, a study conducted by researchers at the University of Guelph in Canada found that young women spend more time on Facebook than men and tend to experience more jealousy when using the platform (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). The study revealed that the Facebook environment contributes to these feelings and amplifies concerns about the quality of their relationships.
- These findings highlight the importance of establishing healthy boundaries for young people when it comes to social media use. Encouraging face-to-face interactions and limiting social media use can help to nurture positive relationships and prevent potential negative effects.

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What do students say?

- I surveyed 303 students at school, ranging from 11-18.
- Many recognised the overuse of social media as a negative to their mental health.
- However, they said it has ‘lots of positives’ and that ‘adults always focus on the negatives’.
- One girl said ‘reaching out on social media got me through a really difficult time.’
- A Sixth Form student said ‘my parents tell me they used to go to bars and pubs at 16 or sit on grit bins and drink cider. We don’t, we go online, but we’re the ones who are wrong? Seems mad.’
- Multiple studies (including Fat et al. 2018) found that underage drinking has been falling for over a decade.

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Strengths-Based vs. Deficit Model

- A **strengths-based** approach is a way of looking at individuals, groups or systems that focuses on the positive attributes, abilities, and potential. This approach emphasises building on existing resources and capabilities to achieve desired outcomes, rather than focusing on deficits or shortcomings. It emphasises on what is going well and what can be improved.
- On the other hand, a **deficit approach** focuses on shortcomings, problems, or deficits. This approach tends to emphasize what is not working and what needs to be fixed. It often leads to a negative outlook and can result in a lack of motivation or self-esteem.

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Deficit Model: Example

- In 2022 there were five secretaries of state; four ministers of state for schools; four children's ministers; and three skills, apprenticeships and higher education ministers…. Resulting in no coherent policy making on any issue. Little investment in post-Covid catch up. The Schools Bill that emerged from the White Paper was rushed and, ultimately, killed by the government. We still await further news on SEND.
- The Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, has said little – and has little cash and little time left to pass legislation.
- Teacher recruitment is at 'crisis level'. (TES 'Jan '23). The number of secondary entrants to initial teacher training dropped by 26% last year compared to 2019. Teacher shortages in key subjects e.g. Maths. Non specialists are frequently teaching subjects they are not qualified to teach. The cuts are hitting poorer communities and the most vulnerable. Special schools have twice the proportion of temporarily filled vacant posts. In the meantime, Sunak has announced that Maths will be studied by all 16-18 year olds … without the funding or staff or any consideration of how to tackle the recruitment crisis.
- All major teachers unions are now balloting for further strike action and Laura Kuenssberg focused her show on Sunday on our broken education system.
- Some school buildings are now deemed unsafe due to the legacy of underfunding on school estates.

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Strengths-Based Approach: Example

- One of the key strengths of the UK education system is its rigorous academic standards. According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UK ranks among the top countries in the world for reading, mathematics, and science literacy.
- Additionally, the UK is home to some of the world's most prestigious universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, which consistently rank among the top institutions globally.
- Another strength of the UK education system is its emphasis on teacher training and professional development. According to the Department for Education, over 90% of teachers in the UK hold a teaching qualification, and the majority of teachers engage in professional development activities each year.
- A further strength is the provision of free education to all children in the UK, regardless of their socio-economic background.
- In addition, the UK education system is known for its diversity and adaptability. There are a variety of different types of schools, including state-funded schools, independent schools, and special schools for children with additional needs.

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What does the academic literature say?

- **"A strengths-based approach focuses on building on an individual's unique abilities and talents, rather than trying to fix their weaknesses."** - Martin Seligman
- **"When we focus on our strengths, we become more engaged, motivated, and successful."** - Tom Rath

- **“I stopped looking at what we couldn’t do, and started looking at what we could, and it all changed. Within three years we were European Champions.”** Carlo Ancelotti
- **“Every manager before him had told me I was lazy, I needed to tackle more, defend for the team. He told me to just score goals. So I did.”** Zlatan Ibrahimovic on Carlo Ancelotti.

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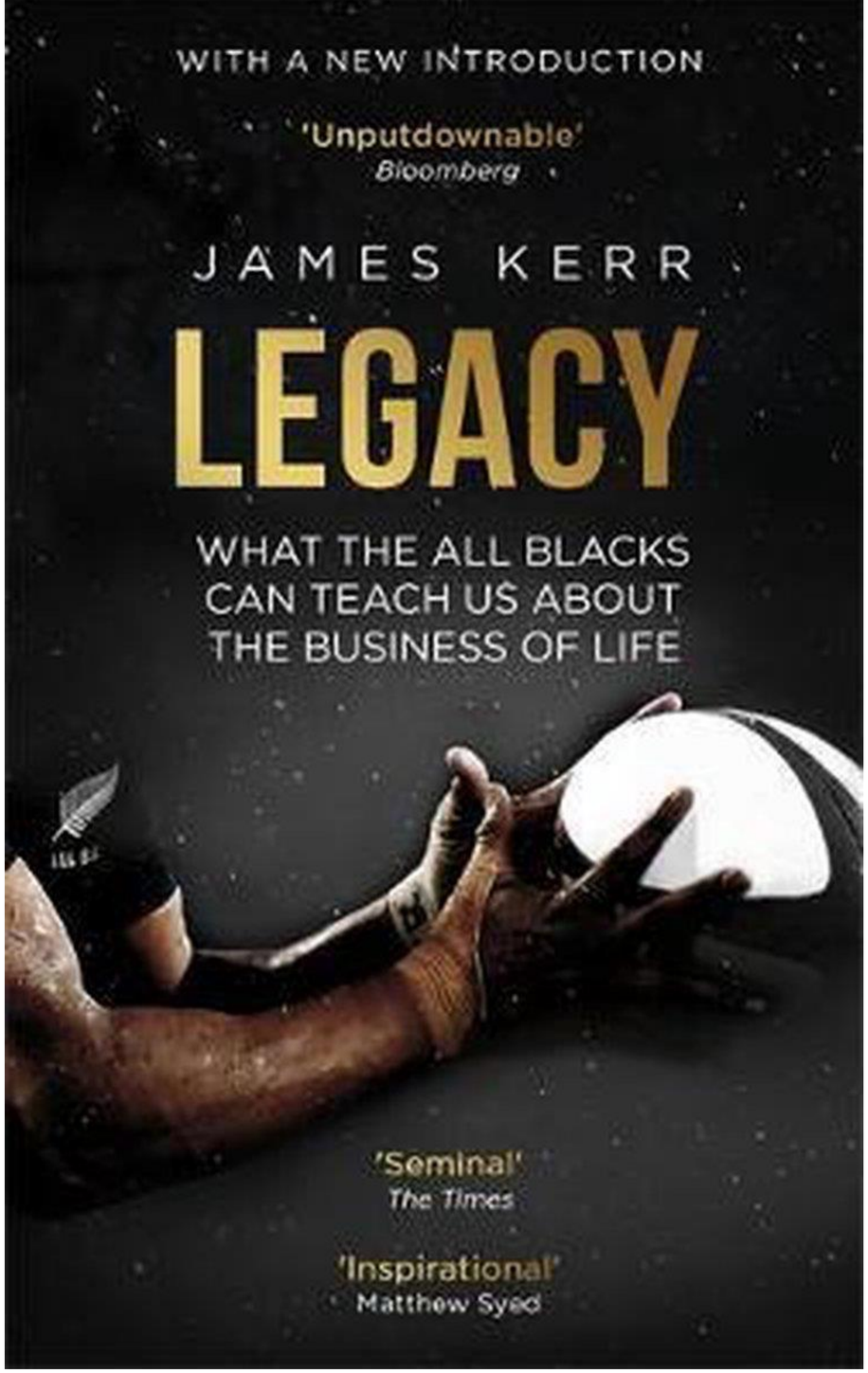
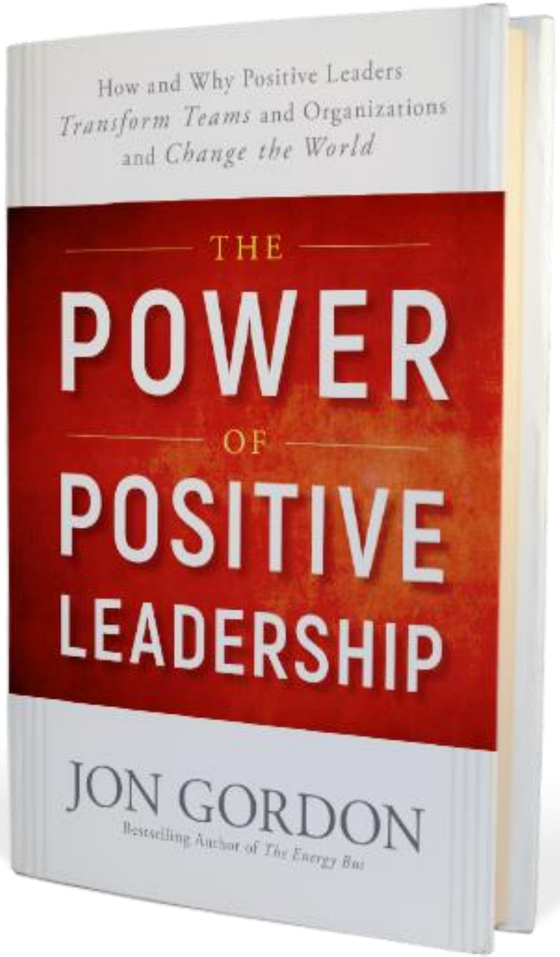
The Theory: ‘Legacy’ by James Kerr

- James Kerr examines the culture and leadership of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, and argues that their success is due in large part to a strengths-based approach.
- Kerr explains that the All Blacks have a culture of **"sweeping the sheds"** which is a metaphor for looking at the strengths of each player and then building a team around those strengths.
- They also have a **"no d*ckheads"** rule that ensures that the team is full of supportive and positive people who lift each other up.
- Additionally, the All Blacks focus on developing a **"growth mindset"** which is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through hard work and dedication.
- **Where there were areas to work on, they looked at their strength first.**



The Theory: "The Power of Positive Leadership" by Jon Gordon and Mike Smith:

- The book explains how a positive mindset and attitude can lead to better communication, collaboration, and productivity among team members.
- The authors argue that by focusing on strengths, **leaders can create a culture of excellence and positivity** that will inspire and motivate employees to perform at their best.
- The book provides practical strategies for identifying and developing the strengths of team members, such as setting clear goals, providing regular feedback, and recognizing and rewarding success.
- The book also emphasizes the importance of **fostering a culture of continuous improvement,** where team members are encouraged to set stretch goals and take on new challenges that will help them to develop their strengths.
- The book is focused on the business context, but the principles can be applied to personal life as well, to become a better leader, parent, spouse, etc.



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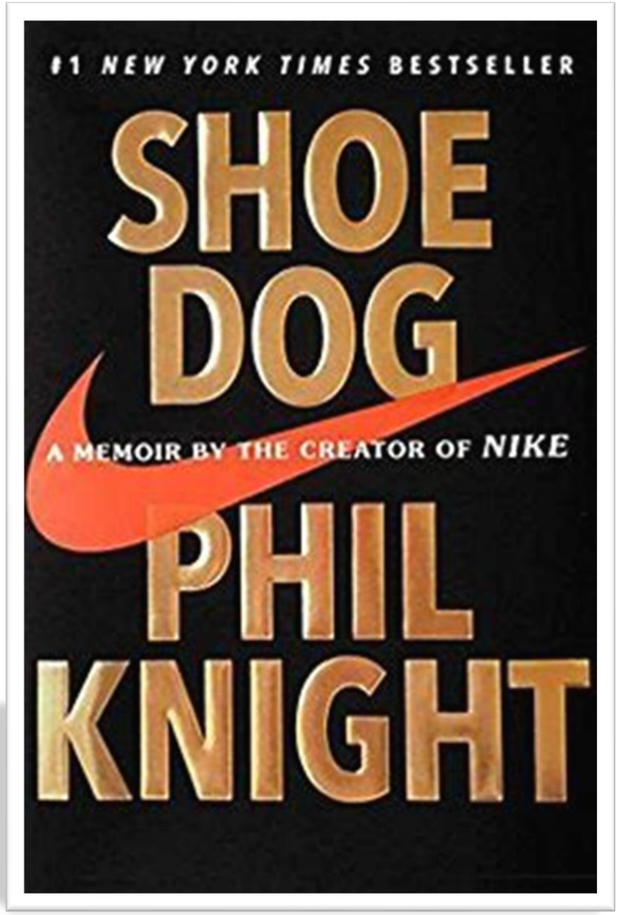
The Theory: "Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of Nike" by Phil Knight

- The book provides an inside look at the early days of the company and the challenges it faced as it grew into a global brand.
- The author describes how the company's culture was built on **the principle of empowering employees to take risks and think creatively**, by giving them the autonomy and resources they needed to excel in their roles.
- The book also explains how the company's leadership team was built around individuals with **diverse strengths and abilities**, and how they worked together to create a cohesive and successful team.
- The author describes how the company **fostered a culture of continuous improvement**, by encouraging employees to set stretch goals and take on new challenges that would help them to develop their strengths.
- **The book also highlights the importance of working with cultural change rather than fighting against it.**



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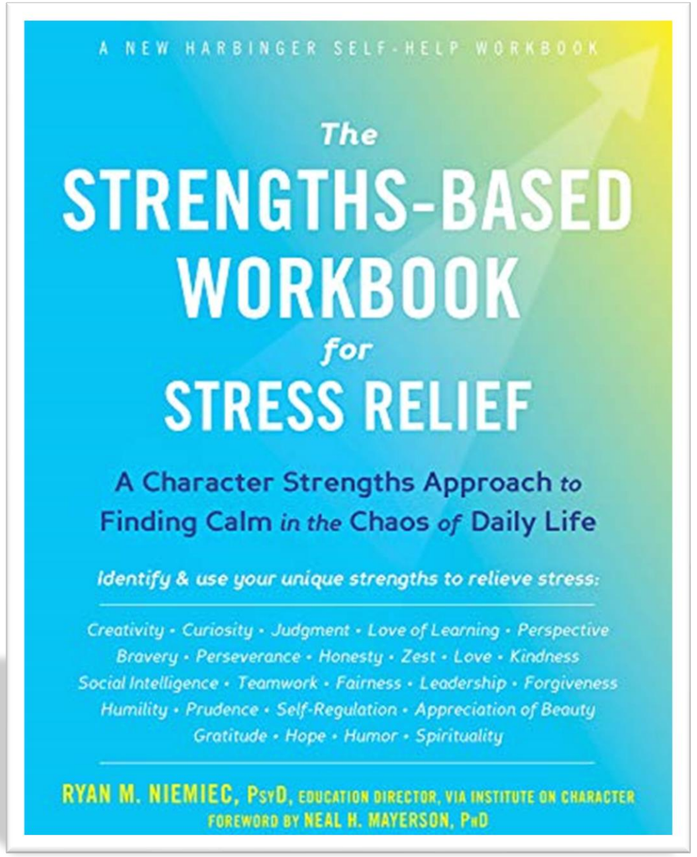
The Theory: ‘The Strengths-Based Workbook for Stress Relief’ by Ryan Niemiec

- In this evidence-based guide, a psychologist offers an innovative strengths-based stress reduction plan grounded in positive psychology.
- **He looks at how you can build on positive character traits** such as perseverance, social intelligence, bravery, self-control, and more—and discover how these strengths can help you cultivate greater happiness, better relationships with others, and improve your overall health.
- The focus on character strengths is due to the link between these and both happiness and stress management.



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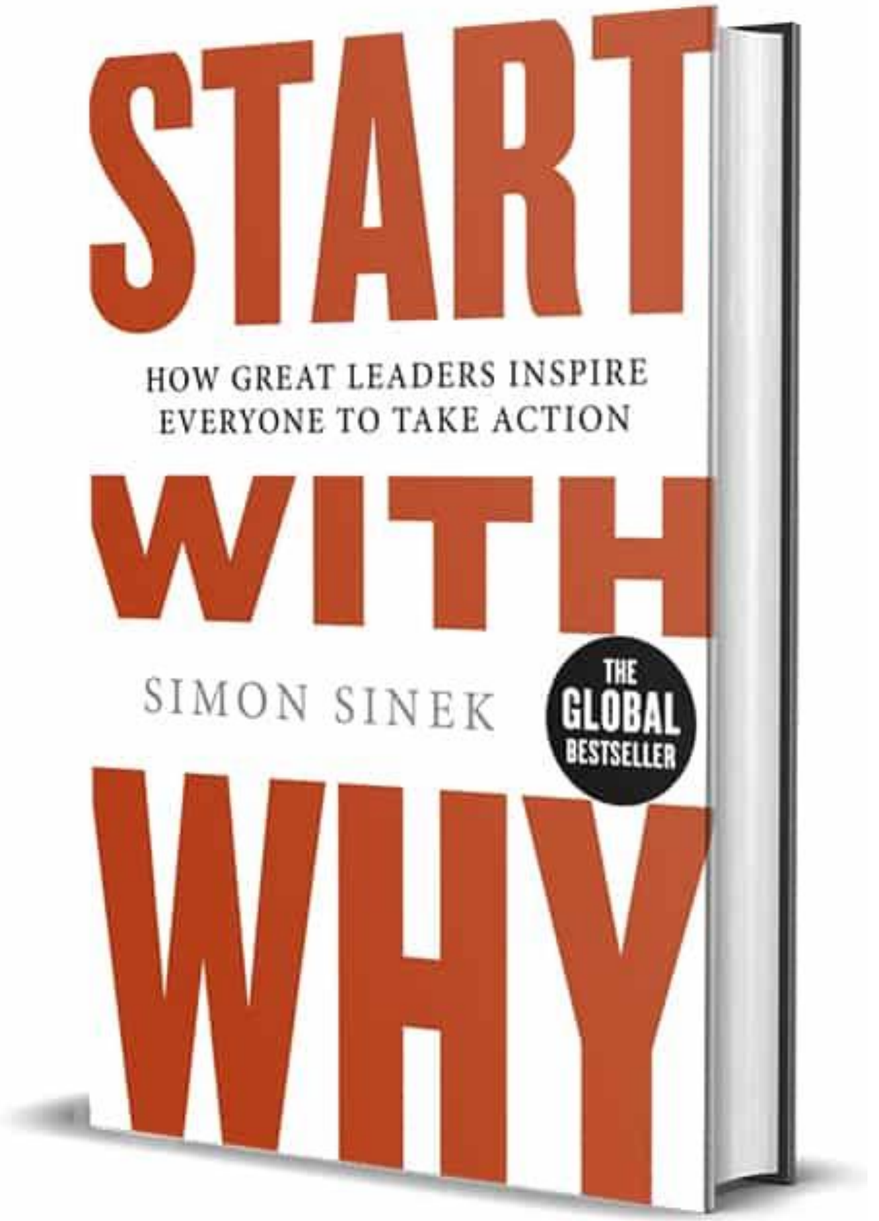
The Theory: ‘Start With Why’ by Simon Sinek

- **Manipulation vs. Inspiration** – manipulation creates short term gains, long term progress is achieved by inspiring.
- **Give them the why** but look at the strengths, not the weaknesses.
- **Keep giving them the why!**
- **Build trust.**
- Find and promote those who believe to create a **critical mass.**
- **Create lasting success –** Start with a strengths based approach.



How can we use a strengths-based approach around social media?

- A strengths-based approach to social media and mental health can be highly effective in promoting well-being.
- According to research, social media can be a positive force in people's lives, enhancing their connections with others and providing opportunities for personal growth and development. (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).
- We can adopt a strengths-based approach to social media and mental health, based on the PERMAH model:

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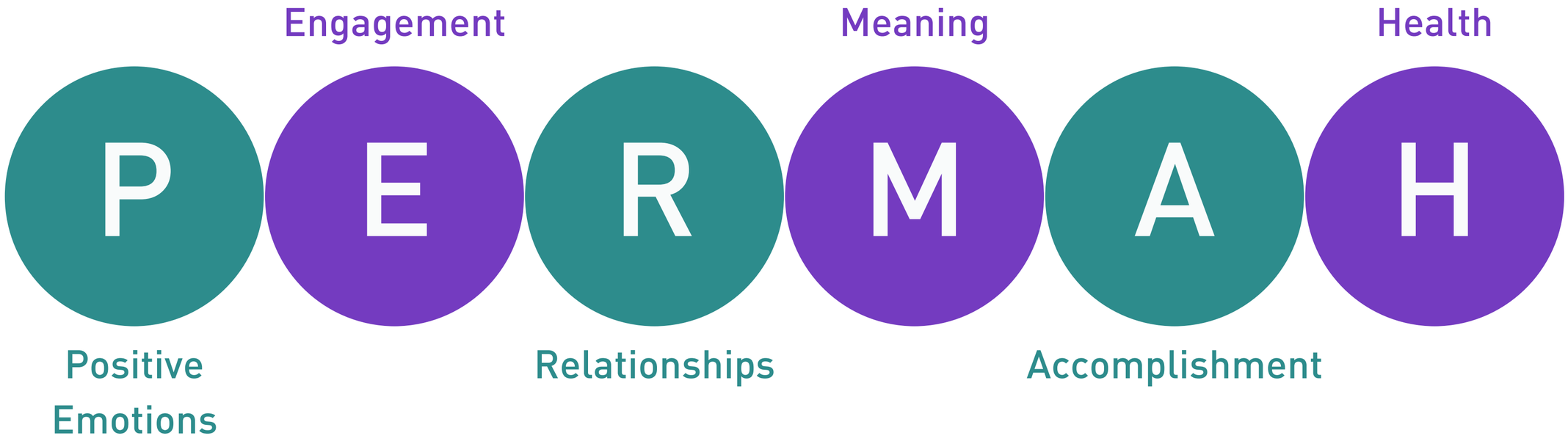

(Seligman, 2011)

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How does PERMAH link to social media and mental health?

1. **Positive emotion:** Encourage the creation and sharing of positive content on social media platforms. Research has shown that positive emotions can boost overall well-being and even help to combat negative emotions like anxiety and depression (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018).
2. **Engagement:** Encourage young people to use social media as a tool for engagement and connection, rather than as a passive form of entertainment. Research has shown that active engagement with social media can lead to increased feelings of social support and belongingness (Hampton et al., 2011).
3. **Relationship:** Encourage individuals to use social media to strengthen and deepen their relationships with friends and family members. Research has shown that social media can be an effective tool for maintaining relationships over long distances (Ellison et al., 2007).
4. **Meaning:** Encourage adolescents to use social media as a platform for expressing their values and passions. Research has shown that having a sense of meaning and purpose in life is associated with higher levels of well-being (Steger et al., 2011).
5. **Accomplishment:** Encourage individuals to use social media to celebrate their accomplishments and share their successes with others. Research has shown that recognizing and celebrating one's accomplishments can boost self-esteem and improve overall well-being (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).
6. **Health and fitness:** Encourage individuals to use social media as a tool for promoting physical health and well-being, such as sharing workout routines or healthy recipes. Research has shown that social support can be a powerful motivator for maintaining healthy behaviours (Burke et al., 2011).

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Reflections

- More research needs to be conducted.
- Try and embrace the strengths.
- We have to listen to young people, understand their views and understand the technology.

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