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## Gender Differences and the Role of Social Media in Self-Harm Behavior among Primary School Students

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# Gender Differences and the Role of Social Media in Self-Harm Behavior among Primary School Students



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**Abstract:** As technology and social media evolve, children are increasingly susceptible to bad content, including self-harm behaviours. Gender disparities influence the effects experienced, with females being more vulnerable to emotional content and social comparison, whereas boys are more prone to encountering information that promotes hazardous masculine behaviour. This study seeks to investigate variations in self-harm behaviour according to gender and the types of social media often utilised by primary school students in Indonesia. This study is comparative in nature; the sample was chosen by random sampling methods. The study comprised a sample of 372 primary school students, with a gender distribution of 30.2% male and 69.8% female. Data were gathered using the Self-harm Scale, which comprises 24 items in a 4-point response format. The analytical method employs an item response theory framework utilising Rasch model. This study employed descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (Anova) utilising Winsteps ver. 5.5.0. The findings indicate substantial disparities in self-harm related to gender and the predominant form of social media utilised. This study indicated that the prevailing trend in social media usage among primary school students involves utilising TikTok and WhatsApp for interaction and content sharing.

**Key Words:** Self-harm behavior; Gender disparities; Social media influence; Primary school students; Indonesia

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## INTRODUCTION

The attitudes and behavior of students at the Primary School (SD) level are one of the main topics in the world of education. Primary schools age is considered a crucial period in the formation of moral values, ethics, and character of students (Widodo, 2024). At this stage, children are in a developmental phase that is very responsive to environmental influences, both from family, school, and society. Based on data from the *Biro Pusat Statistik* Indonesia (BPS) in 2022, as many as 74.02 % of internet users use this access for social media. Even more surprising, 21.62 % of these internet users are primary school-aged children (BPS, 2022). This is ironic, considering that the government through the Ministry of Communication and Information has set the minimum age for using social media at 13 years (Kominfo, 2022). Recently, social media has been abuzz with the viral hand-cutting trend on platforms like TikTok. This phenomenon involved dozens of students at a public primary school in Situbondo, East Java, Indonesia who were known to have cut their hands as part of the trend (narasi.tv). Not only that, a similar case also occurred in Serang, Indonesia where six elementary school students were reported to have committed similar acts (grid.id).

The phenomenon of self-harm, especially among primary school students, has raised deep concerns regarding mental health and the impact of social media use (Borschmann et al., 2020; Geoffroy

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et al., 2022; Townsend et al., 2022). This increased prevalence of self-harm may be due to the competitive nature of the education system, which may be primarily interpreted as academic-related stress (Lim et al., 2019). Another study by Putri Zalfa Salsabila found a significant relationship between the anxiety of Twitter social media users and self-injury behavior (Salsabila et al., 2023). However, according to Nandela's study, low levels of social support received through social media tend to be associated with lower levels of self-harm behavior (Nandela, 2019). These cases highlight the need for more attention to the impact of social media on children's mental health, especially primary school students, and the importance of interventions involving families, schools, and communities to prevent such behavior.

Similar observation applies to non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), where there exists a greater disparity between genders in clinical cases compared to population samples (Bresin & Schoenleber, 2015). Among cases of medically serious suicide attempts, the gender disparity is less significant (Beautrais, 2002). The phenomenon known as the "suicidal gender paradox" highlights the observation that, although women have a greater incidence of self-harm, in comparison to women, men have a higher mortality rate from suicide (Bresin & Schoenleber, 2015; Schrijvers et al., 2012). Women exhibit elevated prevalence of internalising diseases, such as depression and anxiety, which are linked to thoughts of suicide and unsuccessful suicide attempts. Among suicidal men, externalising problems associated with more violent and impulsive behaviour are particularly prominent and may partially account for the higher fatal consequences of their suicide behaviour (Schrijvers et al., 2012). Despite growing concerns, there is a lack of comprehensive research focusing on gender differences and the role of social media in self-harm behavior among primary school students. Existing studies predominantly explore self-harm behaviors in adolescents and young adults, leaving a significant gap in understanding the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of these behaviors on younger children. This is particularly important, as primary school students are at an important stage of emotional and social development (Hasanah, 2019), where external influences such as family, peers, and increasingly, social media, can profoundly shape their mental health outcomes.

The gap is further highlighted by the limited exploration of how gender differences manifest in self-harm behaviors within this age group. Research on older populations suggests notable disparities in how males and females engage in and are affected by self-harm, yet little is known about whether these patterns extend to younger children. Additionally, the rapid rise in social media usage among primary school students introduces a new layer of complexity, potentially influencing self-harm behavior through exposure to harmful content, peer validation mechanisms, and social comparison. In today's digital era, high levels of exposure to social media have had a significant impact on students' behavioral patterns (Rezeki Hasibuan et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2019). Social media, along with students' surroundings, play a crucial role in triggering self-harm behavior (Salsabila et al., 2023). Psychological factors that emerge both in the real world and on social media platforms are the main triggers for the emergence of this behavior. In addition, social pressure, self-comparison with others, and unrealistic norms that are often displayed on social media are also significant contributors to this behavior (Widyawati & Kurniawan, 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine differences in self-harm behavior in terms of gender and the social media most frequently used by primary school students.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study is a comparative study conducted using the incidental sampling method. This method was chosen because we did not determine the sample specifically in advance, but rather selected respondents based on their availability which happened to be accessible during the data collection period. In other words, individuals who can be contacted or who respond to the survey invitation through the channels used, such as online advertisements, emails, blogs, and social media platforms, will be included in the sample.

The purpose of using the incidental sampling method in this study is to facilitate data collection from a large population that is difficult to reach directly, such as elementary school students in Jakarta and Banten, Indonesia. This method allows us to obtain a fairly representative sample even though it does not go through a strict selection procedure, given the limitations of time and resources. Before respondents began the survey, written consent was obtained electronically from authorized parties, including parents or guardians of students.

The sample size in this study included 372 6th grade primary school students in Jakarta and Banten, these students are spread across four primary Schools, namely SDN Tanjung Barat 03 Pagi ( $n = 26.6\%$ ), SD Plus Hang Tuang 4 South Jakarta ( $n = 31.2\%$ ), SDN 02 Serang City ( $n = 23.7\%$ ), and SDN Drangong Serang City ( $n = 18.5\%$ ), with a gender distribution of 30.2% male and 69.8% female. We chose Jakarta and Banten as the research locations because these two regions offer different but complementary characteristics to support the diversity of research data. Jakarta as the nation's capital has a heterogeneous population with diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. This provides variation in data that can represent a complex urban environment. In contrast, Banten, especially areas such as Serang, represents an area with suburban or semi-urban characteristics, allowing for a comparison between urban and semi-urban educational contexts.

In addition, it is important to note that the sample has been modified to reflect the most common social media platforms used by the participants. In this study, it was found that from the total sample, 92 participants reported frequent use of Instagram, 149 participants actively used TikTok, and 131 participants chose WhatsApp as their main social media platform. This study is further enhanced by the selection of individuals who represent their preferences for social media platforms, allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the level of self-harm in relation to gender and the specific social media platforms used by 6th grade elementary school students in Jakarta and Banten.

## Procedures and Instrumentation

Data for each test group was collected using the Self-harm instrument developed by (Vrouva et al., 2010). Testing the quality of self-harm instruments using the Rasch Model, because of its ability to produce high reliability estimates both at the individual level (person reliability) and items (item reliability). By using this model, we can ensure that the measurement instrument provides consistent and stable results, both for each individual tested and for each item in the test (Linacre, 2021; Sumintono & Widhiarso, 2015). This is important to ensure that the measurement of self-harm behavior carried out has a reliable quality, where each item can accurately measure the intended aspect, and each individual response reflects relevant abilities or characteristics. The results of the instrument analysis show that person reliability is 0.75 and item reliability is 0.99. This shows that the quality of the answers given by the person on each test is good and the quality of the items used in the measurement is very good. Meanwhile, the value of each test on Cronbach's alpha (KR-20) is 0.87, this shows that the interaction between person and item is very good. Furthermore, the value of raw variance explained by measures is 48%, this shows that the minimum unidimensional requirement of 47.1% has been fulfilled (JM, 2015). In addition, the item response sensitivity pattern value of +1.08 logit (INFIT MNSQ) and the overall item response pattern sensitivity value of +0.95 logit (OUTFIT MNSQ) indicate that they are in the ideal range. This indicates that the self-harm instrument has very good quality for the measurement conditions carried out (details in Table 1).

## Data Analysis

The present study utilizes a rigorous analytical methodology by employing Item Response Theory (IRT) and conducting Rasch Model analysis. This methodology presents several benefits in assessing the caliber and attributes of research instrument items, facilitating a more rigorous scrutiny of the data (Bond et al., 2020). In order to investigate the descriptive and differential characteristics of the data, the present study employs Anova statistical analysis (Bray & Maxwell, 1985). This methodology facilitates the discernment of notable disparities among different groups or circumstances within the dataset.

The study makes use of existing research frameworks in the field, specifically referencing numerous related studies conducted by (Hafni et al., 2023; Ifdil et al., 2018; Lubis et al., 2022; Syahputra

& Erwinda, 2020). This exemplifies the manner in which the research expands upon existing knowledge and prior research within the subject, making a substantial contribution to the progression of knowledge in this particular topic. In order to carry out the aforementioned studies, the study utilizes WINSTEPS Version 5.5.0 software, which was developed by (Linacre, 2021). The utilization of this program guarantees dependability and simplicity in the processing of data and the execution of the Rasch Model analysis with a high level of precision (Linacre, 2017). As a result, the research guarantees the reliability of the data analysis performed, so yielding important conclusions within the specific context of this study.

## RESULTS

This research uses four analyses, including: 1) descriptive test of Self-harm based on gender; 2) descriptive test of Self-harm based on frequently used social media; and 3) test differences in Self-harm based on gender and frequently used social media. Furthermore, descriptive tests based on gender are presented in table one below.

### Descriptive Test of Self-harm Based on Gender

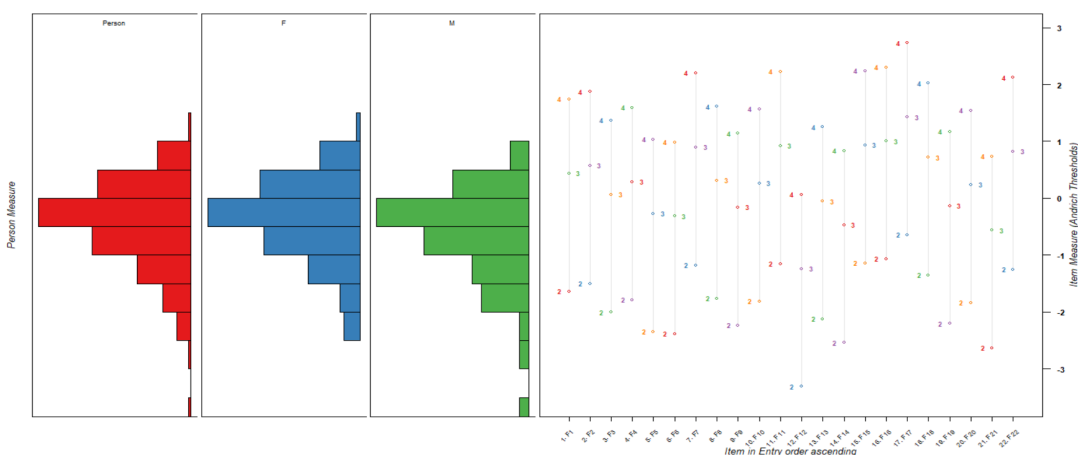
In Table 1, it shows that female students ( $n = 220$ ) are more likely to fill out the self-harm instrument compared to male students ( $n = 152$ ). Overall, the reliability of the model that was formed when filling out the Self-harm instrument was that the quality of the answers given by all respondents was good ( $F = 0.82$  and  $M = 0.88$ ). Furthermore, the standard error of the mean shows good conditions and the model separation formed when filling in the instrument is two groups (high and low).

**Table 1.** Descriptive of Self-harm in terms of gender

Person Count	Mean Measure	S.E. Mean	Median	SD	Model Separation	Model Reliability	Mean Outfit	Code
372	-0.52	0.05	-0.38	0.76	2.39	0.85	1.08	*
220	-0.35	0.05	-0.27	0.68	2.13	0.82	0.98	F
152	-0.69	0.13	-0.55	0.88	2.67	0.88	1.35	M

Notes: \* = Total; F = Female; M = Male

The Figure 1 is a Wright Map used to analyze self-harm tendencies by gender, and clearly shows significant differences between male and females student in this regard.



**Figure 1.** Wright Map Self-Harm Based on Gender

On the left side of the map, it can be seen that the distribution of self-harm tendencies (Person Measure) for women, indicated in blue, is much wider and more spread across the range of self-harm

tendencies than for male, indicated in green. This suggests that female experience self-harm more often than men, with more women having high levels of self-harm tendencies.

The right side of the map, which shows the difficulty of the various self-harm items, reinforces this finding by showing that female tend to have greater difficulty responding to these items. The numbers scattered across the map indicate the varying levels of difficulty of the self-harm questions for different groups of respondents, and the different colors indicate different responses. Overall, the Wright Map highlights that female are more vulnerable to self-harm than men, both in terms of the distribution of tendencies and responses to the self-harm questions.

### Self-harm Descriptive Test Based on Social Media Frequently Used by Primary School Children's

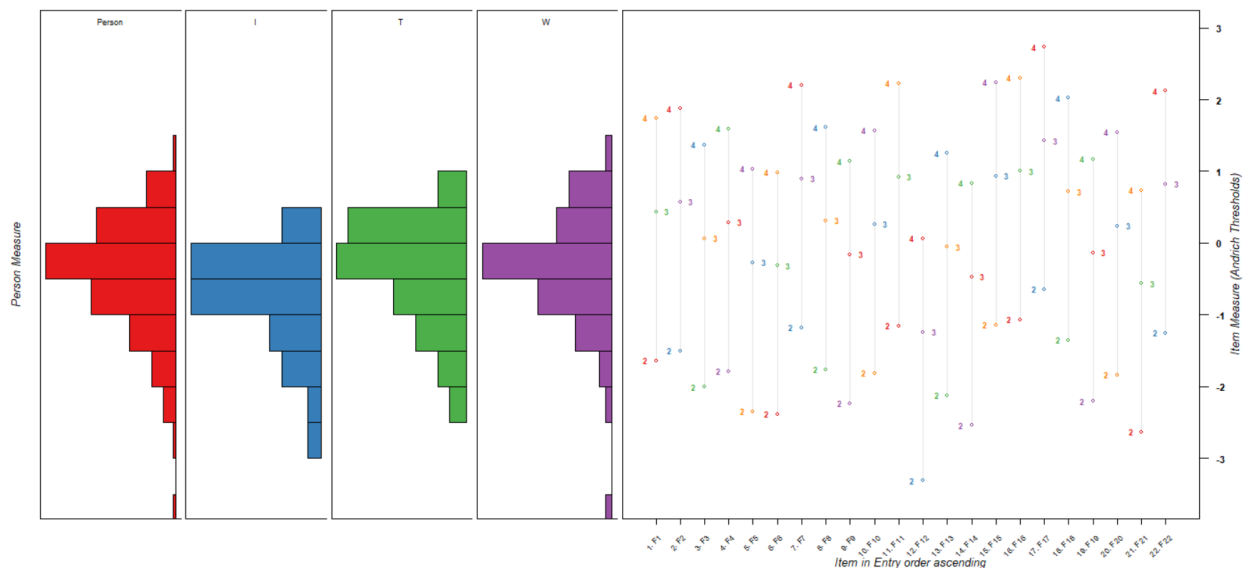
Table 2 indicates that the TikTok platform is the most frequently utilised by the kids in Indonesia, as demonstrated by a mean measure value of -0.36 logit. Simultaneously, the Instagram platform exhibits the lowest usage (-0.67 logit) in comparison to the WhatsApp platform. Instagram exhibits the lowest dependability number when compared to WhatsApp and TikTok, indicating that the consistency of responses from 92 children users of Instagram falls within the sufficient category.

**Table 2.** Descriptive of Self-harm in terms of social media frequently used by Children

Person Count	Mean Measure	S.E. Mean	Median	SD	Model Separation	Model Reliability	Mean Outfit	Code
372	-0.42	0.06	-0.30	0.70	2.39	0.85	1.04	*
92	-0.67	0.12	-0.54	0.58	1.96	0.79	1.12	I
149	-0.36	0.08	-0.22	0.64	2.21	0.83	1.01	T
131	-0.37	0.11	-0.30	0.80	2.69	0.88	1.02	W

Explanation: \* = Total; = Instagram; T = TikTok; W= WhatsApp

The depiction of self-harm, as observed in commonly utilised social media, is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Wright Map Self-harm Based on Social Media Frequently Used by Children

This histogram illustrates that the distribution of self-harm tendencies fluctuates according on the predominant social media utilised. For instance, groups T (blue) and W (green) exhibit a more equitable distribution and are dispersed along the spectrum of self-harm tendencies, suggesting that users of these platforms demonstrate considerable variability in self-harm levels. Conversely, group I (red) exhibits a more concentrated distribution at lower levels of self-harm tendencies, whereas the other groups (purple) demonstrate elevated tendencies. The right side of the map illustrates the difficulty level of each item or

question pertaining to self-harm, determined by the sequence of item entry. The numerical range from 1 to 4 signifies the difficulty level of each task, while distinct colours denote the various categories of social media utilised by the children. A larger number indicates greater difficulty for a certain group of respondents to answer the item properly. This Wright Map offers a comprehensive analysis of the correlation between various social media usage and the prevalence of self-harm tendencies in adolescents, indicating that the specific platforms utilised may affect their risk of self-harm.

### Testing Differences in Self-harm Based on Gender and Social Media Frequently Used by Children

Table 3 demonstrates significant disparities in self-harm based on gender and the social media platforms often utilised by children. We have discerned some intriguing results via the difference test. The results of the difference test indicate considerable disparities in the level of self-harm based on gender. The subsequent notable discovery was the absence of a significant disparity in the incidence of self-harm relative to the social media platforms predominantly utilised by primary school children. This indicates that, irrespective of the social media platforms utilised regularly, the incidence of self-harm is consistently uniform across the cohort. The specific sort of social media utilised by primary school children does not seem to significantly impact their levels of self-harm.

**Table 3.** Self-harm Anova Test Based on Gender and Social Media Frequently Used by Children

Anova test	Sum of Squares	d.f.	Mean Square	F-test	Prob
Gender	4.71	1.00	4.71	8.48	0.004
Social media that is often used by children	2.45	2.00	1.22	2.14	0.12
Gender * social media that is often used by children	6.87	5.00	1.37	2.47	0.034

Nonetheless, a comprehensive analysis that examined both gender variables and the types of social media utilised by adolescents yielded further intriguing findings. The results demonstrate a substantial interaction between gender variables and the type of social media utilised, affecting the incidence of self-harm. The probability value of 0.034 suggests that gender and social media usage preferences can together affect the incidence of self-harm in youngsters. This elucidates the interplay between these two components within the framework of self-harm.

## DISCUSSION

This discrepancy underscores the intricate interplay of gender and social media usage patterns in shaping the experience of Self-harm, a phenomenon deserving of further exploration and analysis. Based on case file data of 41 children with gender dysphoria (GD) between the ages of 5 and 11 years, Holt et al.22 found that 14.6% had a history of suicidal ideation and 17.0% had a history of either selfharm (14.6%) or suicide attempts (2.4%). These percentages could have been underestimates, as the case file data were based on varied sources of information, and it is conceivable that suicidality was not asked about in all cases. In addition, no comparison groups were used. This discovery may provide an explanation for certain inconsistencies observed in the literature.

Instead, this behavior often occurs because they simply follow trends they see on social media without understanding the intent, purpose, or impact of these actions. This is in line with the characteristics of elementary school age development, where children are at a stage of cognitive development that is more dominant in imitating the behavior around them, because their abstract thinking skills are not yet fully developed. This phenomenon shows how vulnerable children at this age are to the influence of the digital environment, which can shape their mindset and behavior without adequate understanding. Recently, social media has been abuzz with the viral hand-cutting trend on platforms like TikTok (Marhalini et al., 2024). This phenomenon involved dozens of students at a public elementary school in Situbondo, East Java, who were known to have cut their hands as part of the trend (narasi.tv). Not only that, a similar case also occurred in Serang, where six elementary school students were reported to have committed similar acts (grid.id). Therefore, the role of parental guidance and

supervision is very important in helping children use social media wisely. Parents need to be actively involved in monitoring the content consumed by children, providing education about the negative impacts of inappropriate behavior, and directing them to use social media as a positive means of learning and interacting (Anatasya et al., 2024; Apriliansyah et al., 2022). In addition, collaboration between families, schools, and communities is needed to provide adequate digital education, develop media literacy among elementary school students, and create an environment that supports the development of positive values (Rifqi et al., 2024). Thus, phenomena such as self-harm influenced by social media trends can be minimized, so that children can grow up in a healthy and conducive environment for their mental development.

The results of the study show that the TikTok platform has the highest rate of self-harm behavior compared to other social media among children. This can be attributed to the various interesting features that TikTok has, such as the live and story features (Harriger et al., 2023; Quiroz, 2020). Through this feature, users can easily publish activities that are being carried out in real-time, so that all TikTok users can find out about these activities. The flexibility and high visibility of these features provide space for users to express themselves, but on the other hand, they also have significant negative impacts. One of them is the ease of uploading negative content, including images or videos that show self-harm, especially when users are facing emotional stress or personal problems. Content like this can quickly spread and go viral because TikTok's algorithm often promotes videos with high interaction, without considering the psychological impact on other users, especially children (Iqbal, 2021). The combination of the attractiveness of TikTok's features and the nature of the algorithm that encourages engagement makes this platform a place that is vulnerable to imitative behavior, especially among children who are at a developmental stage where they are more likely to follow trends without understanding the consequences (Quiroz, 2020). Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the impact of TikTok features on children's mental health (Udam et al., 2024), as well as to develop digital supervision and education strategies to minimize the risk of spreading self-harm content on this platform.

Aitken et al. (2016) research results, there is little suicidal ideation in very young children, but by the age of 10 to 12 years, suicidal ideation occurs in about 30% of the sample. This age-related pattern also appears among children referred in the standardization sample. However, the age-related pattern among referred children is more complex: for example, at the age of 6 to 8 years, the percentage of children involved in self-harm/suicide attempts is quite similar to talking about suicide; only at the age of 9 years does the latter exceed the former. Compared with the reference group of children who were not referred, children referred by gender, their siblings, and referred children all showed a significantly increased likelihood of suicidal ideation and behavior and a higher odds ratio for self-harm/suicide attempts than for talking about suicide.

The present study carries significant ramifications across multiple dimensions. Initially, the findings of this study can offer comprehensive understanding for educators, parents, and policy makers on the frequency and variations in self-harm conduct among primary school pupils, stratified by gender and the specific social media platforms they regularly engage with. Evidence indicating notable variations in self-harm behaviour depending on gender and the social media platform utilized implies the necessity for more focused interventions aimed at mitigating the risk of self-harm in young children. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the need of giving particular consideration to the influence of social media usage on the mental well-being of children, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp for the purpose of interactivity and content sharing. Hence, these discoveries can stimulate the advancement of more effective digital education and literacy initiatives for children and parents, with the objective of instructing them on the responsible and healthy use of social media.

## Study Limitations

This study had several limitations, particularly in obtaining a representative sample of elementary school children. This age group posed challenges due to strict ethics protocols, which required parental consent and ensuring child-friendly data collection methods. These challenges limited sample size and selection bias, as children with parental consent to participate may differ significantly from those without. Furthermore, fourth-grade children may have difficulty understanding and responding to survey



items accurately, leading to potential inaccuracies in self-reported data. Reliance on a limited sample also reduces the generalizability of findings to the broader population.

Future research should address the limitations of this study by exploring more effective methods for sampling and engaging elementary school children. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how self-harm behaviours and social media usage evolve over time, particularly as children transition to adolescence. Expanding the scope to include a broader range of social media platforms and their unique features would also enrich the understanding of platform-specific risks.

## CONCLUSION

The results demonstrate a considerable disparity in the prevalence of self-harm based on gender. Additional findings revealed that the extent of self-harm was markedly affected by the sort of social media utilised and gender variables. The findings indicate that the incidence of self-harm among primary school students may be affected by their gender and social media usage choices. This analysis reveals that children are presently using TikTok and WhatsApp to interact with and disseminate content on social media. These findings can serve as a basis for further investigation into the effects of self-harm across different ages, cultures, and social circumstances. Further research could enhance our understanding of the impact of social media on our lives.

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