



# Social Media's Influence on the Attitudes of Younger Daughters-in-Law towards their Mothers-in-Law: A South African Context

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**Abstract:** This systematic review explores social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law within the South African context. The researchers carried out the "Preferred Reporting Items for the Systematic Review and Meta-analysis" guidelines as a research methodology. The scientific search databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Sabinet and Taylor & Francis were used by the researchers to retrieve and analyse information from fourteen peer-reviewed journal articles (n=14) published between 2012 and 2023. Social media use is quickly expanding and families rely on it to stay in touch with their loved ones on a regular basis. Although social media has greatly enhanced the lives of many people, some cultures still value face-to-face interactions, especially in situations where they have to fulfil their traditional practices such as welcoming a daughter-in-law into their family or engaging in specific sensitive conversations. The study is limited to the South African context. Therefore, the role of family systems should be further explored to understand the mother-and-daughter-in-law relationship. More studies can be conducted to explore the role of culture in marriage and in-law relationships within the South African context. The study is valuable as it paves the way for further studies relating to the topic within the South African context. Further, this study is pivotal because it was conducted to help both daughters- and mothers-in-law strengthen and handle their online in-law relationships.

**Keywords:** Daughters-In-Law, Mothers-In-Law, Social Media, South Africa, Technology

## 1. Introduction And Background

In recent years the use of social media has increased and online communication has replaced face-to-face communication as the preferred method of communication (Ante-Contreras, 2016). As Brann (2017) explains, social media can be a great way to share our lives with friends and family, whether it's the different events we have attended, pictures of our children, special occasions or just everyday life. According to Ante-Contreras (2016), with the rate at that social media communication is growing, both mothers- and daughters-in-law should find meaningful ways of making it possible for this kind of communication to be used, especially in cases where daughters-in-law stay far from their mothers-in-law. In relation to this, Nganase and Basson (2019) conducted a study on the dynamics of the relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law in South Africa and found that in black society, the family is viewed as being a highly important social, cultural and economic institution whose unity and cohesiveness should be maintained. They further mention that the term 'in-law' refers to the distinct relationships that are formed through marriage (Nganase & Basson 2019).

According to Drouin, McDaniel, Peter and Toscos (2020), social media use is growing quickly, and younger generations mostly use these platforms to communicate with one another and with their parents. Depending on the type of interaction, Drouin et al. (2020) indicate that this can either have a beneficial or negative impact because the pace of social media varies from generation to generation, and from culture to culture. Furthermore, Drouin et al. (2020) explain that families use social media for a variety of purposes and some families have taken advantage of its rapid growth to stay in contact with one another at any time of the day.

Leyrer-Jackson and Wilson (2018) define social media as "websites and technological applications that allow its users to share content and/or to participate in social networking". According to Nabievna (2021) as much as the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law has not been historically viewed as being a positive one, younger daughters-in-law can now influence the nature of this relationship because of their use of social media for communication. In this regard Nganase and Basson (2019) state that when a son gets married, one of the most critical but ambivalent relationships created is the mother-daughter-in-law relationship.

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Prentice (2009) suggests that when a couple marries, both mother- and daughter-in-law aspire to have a good relationship and that both women are uncertain about what to expect from each other in the relationship, although both may have an opinion about what type of relationship they would like to have. Through this newly formed marital relationship, they must learn about each other's wants, desires and temperaments to direct the nature of the association.

The study conducted by Correa (2013) concedes that although younger generations may offer older generations some hope for inclusion in the digital world, younger generations have grown up with a greater level of acquaintance with modern technologies.

In terms of the role culture plays and how this has influenced the mother-daughter-in-law relationship, the study conducted by Nganase and Basson (2017) found that some of the daughters-in-law surveyed stated that culture has not necessarily influenced their relationship with their mothers-in-law. In the same study, a participant stressed that the most important aspect of a relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law is communication, however the study found that a daughter-in-law's failure to follow the expected cultural practices of her husband's family can have a negative effect on her relationship with her mother-in-law (Nganase & Basson, 2017).

The communication challenges between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were also emphasised in the study conducted by Gavins (2022). The above-mentioned author indicated that conflict between daughters and mothers-in-law is one of the oldest familial relationship issues. Mtemeri and Maziti (2017) also found that conflict is seen as the struggle between groups or individuals in trying to maximise the benefits and exercise influence and control over others in order to achieve their own goals as people with different interests and values. In relation to this, Anderson (2016) also found that the mother-/daughter-in-law relationship has been identified as the most problematic. Pagente (2023) added that the experiences shared between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law often become an issue in a family system. In some of the studies, this kind of relationship did not start well in the beginning.

In his study on the relationship between younger daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, Brann (2017) found that using social media to communicate compromises the quality of sharing emotions since technology makes it difficult to fully understand how someone is feeling, and increases the risk of misinterpretation because this type of communication can lack emotional connectivity. Furthermore, due to societal changes and communication norms, some mothers-in-law struggle to understand if this type of contact, which is often not face-to-face, is still appropriate for fostering and maintaining a relationship with their daughter-in-law (Brann, 2017). Because of this expectation, in situations where cultural customs are still followed and face-to-face communication is the normative form of communication, it may be difficult for mothers-in-law to connect with their daughters-in-law.

It is against this background that the study scrutinises the subject of social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law for the provision of possible solutions to this phenomenon. There are few studies of this nature that have already been conducted in South Africa. Thus, this study seeks to contribute towards the already existing knowledge on this subject matter and bring about solutions to the study problem using cultural considerations.

The study is structured as follows, this introduction is followed by the research questions for the study. The theories that serve as a roadmap for the study are presented in the third section. The fourth section presents the materials and methods used for the study. The fifth section of the study is a systematic review of the 14 peer-reviewed journal articles. The conclusion of the study is presented in the sixth section. The limitations of the study were included in the seventh section. The last section presents the future directions of study.

## 2. Research Questions

The study is grounded in the following threefold research questions:

- What are the roles of social media in the family environment?
- What are the effects of social media on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law?
- What probable ways can be used to foster a better relationship between younger daughters-in-law and their mothers-in-law online?

## 3. Theories That Serve As A Roadmap For The Study

The two theoretical paradigms that provided perspectives on social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law are the FST and SET. FST was used in this study because it supports the notion that a family unit is a complex social system in which its members interact to influence each other's behaviour. In this regard, Priest (2021) explains that the basic definition of the FST is that it is a theory that proposes testable predictions about interrelated people. To expand on this explanation, the FST is a theory that predicts and explains how people within a family system interact, and how the interactions inside a family system are different from those outside of it. As indicated by Pagente (2023), this theory is an approach to understanding human functioning that focuses on interactions between people in a family and between the family and the context(s) in which that family is embedded. In addition to this, Johnson and Ray (2016) indicate that FST places its primary focus on the exchanges of behaviour that take place in a given moment of interaction between members

of a family unit. The theory maintains that patterns of interaction between family members bring forth, maintain, and perpetuate both problematic and nonproblematic behaviour.

SET was used in this study because it explains the communication exchange of people and how they build relationships based on this communication exchange. The theory also emphasises the various social exchange models that focus on the importance of interpersonal relationships as described within three broad categories: (1) models that emphasise how relationships form; (2) models that emphasise the attributes of a relationship; and (3) models that feature the relationship as a social context under which exchange commodities are defined. According to Pagente (2023), the concept of SET is based on the notion that a relationship between two people is created through a process of cost-benefit analysis. Therefore, Pan and Crotts (2012) explain that SET focuses on social media communication and is used to explain how humans communicate with each other; how they form relationships and bonds; and how communities are formed through communication exchanges. In addition to this, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) emphasise that the theory explores exchanges between individuals or small groups. Thus, this theory is relevant to the study because it promotes the creation of a positive communication bond between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Further, Mitchell, Cropanzano and Quisenberry (2014) highlight that a series of mutual exchanges strengthen the quality of the relationship between the exchange parties, thereby producing beneficial and productive behaviours.

#### **4. Materials And Methods**

PRISMA was used as the methodology for this study. As described Moher, Shamseer, Clarke, Gherzi, Liberati, Petticrew, Shekelle and Stewart (2015), PRISMA is an evidence-based minimum set of items used for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Moher et al. (2015) posit that PRISMA “is used for reporting reviews and evaluating randomised trials, but it can also be used as a basis for reporting systematic reviews”, they further explain that a systematic review attempts to collate all relevant evidence that fits the pre-specified eligibility criteria to answer a specific research question. It uses explicit, systematic methods to minimise bias in the identification, selection, synthesis and summary of studies, and in this regard Ahn and Kang (2018) state that systematic reviews and meta-analyses present results by combining and analysing data from different studies conducted on similar research topics.

##### **4.1. Planning phase**

The data for the study was obtained by using the following scientific search databases: Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Sabinet and Taylor & Francis. These search engines were used because of their good reputation for storing peer-reviewed journal articles.

##### **4.2. Scholarly documents selection phase**

This phase concerned the identification of appropriate articles for further analysis. It consisted of three major steps, namely, the initial database search, determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and selecting the relevant studies.

###### **4.2.1. Initial database search**

The following terms were used by the researchers to retrieve the peer-reviewed journal articles from the above-mentioned scientific search databases:

- “Social media and daughters-in-law”
- “Social media and mothers-in-law”
- “Daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law”
- “Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law”
- “Daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law on social media platforms”
- “Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law on social media platforms”
- “Daughters-in-law in South Africa on social media”
- “Mothers-in-law in South Africa on social media”

The above-mentioned keywords-enabled search initially yielded 1 560 studies from seven databases. The search has encompassed studies written in different languages. The studies accessed include journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, among others. After applying and checking the studies, the researchers were left with 230 studies published in various journals in English in total. These articles were then screened to identify duplicates, thereby yielding a total of 80 unique articles.

###### **4.2.2. Determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria**

The researchers reviewed every article to determine if the inclusion and exclusion criteria were met. Below, the researchers depict the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This has been done to determine the relevant scholarly documents used in the systematic review. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are discussed below:

###### **Inclusion criteria of the journal articles:**

- They are written in the English language.

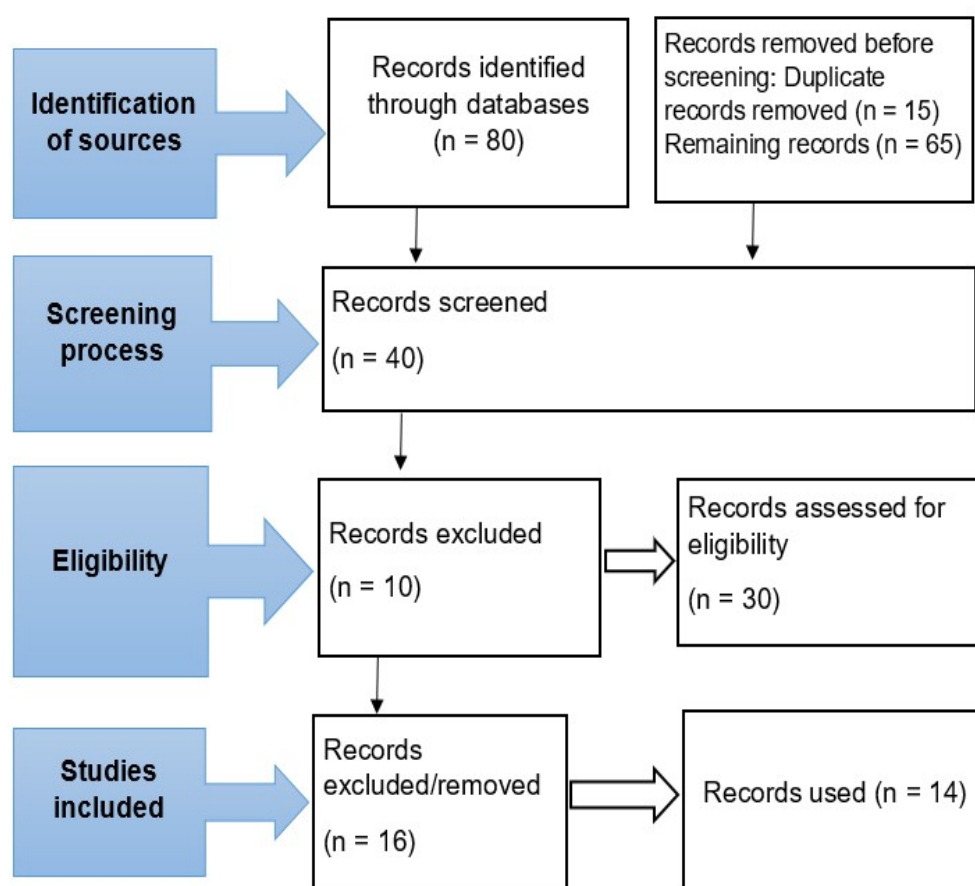
- They cover the variables of the study.
- They are about social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law.
- They are global studies that cover the variables of this study.
- They were published between 2012 to 2023.

#### Exclusion criteria of the journal articles:

- They are not published in the English language.
- They do not cover the variables of the study.
- They do not focus on social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law.
- They are not global studies and do not cover the variables of this study.
- They were published before 2012.

#### 4.2.3. Selecting the relevant studies

Figure 1 depicts the various steps followed by the researchers during the process of searching for journal articles. The initial search yielded 75 records, with an additional 5 records found in during additional searches, for a total of 80 records. Due to information duplication, or the record's failure to meet the inclusion criteria, 15 records were excluded from this total. The remaining records numbered 65, of which 40 were screened further. As a result of this screening, 10 records were eliminated because they contained irrelevant information, leaving 30 records. The eligibility of the remaining 30 records was then determined by the researchers, which translated into 16 scholarly documents being removed because they contained unwanted information about other countries. After screening the initial 80 records for eligibility and relevance, 14 scholarly documents were used in this study.



**Supplementary figure 1:** PRISMA flow chart for systematic review

After screening the articles, the researchers validated the 14 retrieved peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure the quality of the study. As indicated in Table 1, the study focuses on 14 peer-reviewed journal journals. All the journal articles included in this study have been reviewed by the researchers to determine if the inclusion and exclusion criteria have been met.

The current study includes 14 peer-reviewed journal articles published across various databases. Table 1 below depicts the entire process of the researchers' search.

**Table 1.** Summary of the journal articles used in the study

Author(s)/ year and country of publication	Scholarly document	Methods	Theoretical framework(s)
Galam (2016), United Kingdom	Journal article	Qualitative, In-depth semi-structured interviews	N/A
Nganase & Basson (2019), United States	Journal article	Qualitative, In-depth interviews, Phenomenological analysis	Family systems theory
Nganase & Basson (2017), Botswana	Journal article	Qualitative, Thematic analysis, Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Family systems theory and Social constructionism
Correa (2013), United States	Journal article	Qualitative, Thematic analysis	Socialisation and digital inclusion theory
Kim & Song (2019), Dubai, UAE	Journal article	Qualitative, Thematic analysis	N/A
Drouin, et al. (2020), United States	Journal article	Quantitative, Online surveys, SPSS	N/A
Cotten, Anderson & McCullough (2013), Canada	Journal article	Quantitative, Regression analysis	N/A
Procentese, Gatti & Di Napoli (2019), Switzerland	Journal article	Quantitative	N/A
He (2019), France	Journal article	Qualitative	N/A
Husain, Ibrahim & Mushtaq (2023), Pakistan	Journal article	Quantitative, Exploratory factor analysis	N/A
Nabievna (2021), United States	Journal article	Qualitative	N/A
Greif & Saviet (2020), United States	Journal article	Qualitative, Interview	N/A
Greif & Woolley (2019), United Kingdom	Journal article	Quantitative	N/A
Fingerman, Gilligan, Vanderdrift & Pitzer (2012), United States	Journal article	Quantitative	N/A

## 5. Review Of Literature

### 5.1. Problematisations of social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law

Research on the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship has primarily focused on the conflict between the two (Galam, 2016). In their study on socio-cultural influences on the mother-and-daughter-in-law relationship within a South African context, Nganase and Basson (2019) indicated that daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law are regarded as the main role-players within the family relationship. However, as a result the relationship has the greatest risk of developing difficulties within the in-law structure. The use of social media, particularly by younger daughters-in-law, has had a negative impact on their ability to communicate with their older mothers-in-law. Nganase and Basson (2017) agree with this by revealing that in-law relationships remain among the vaguest and most challenging of family relationships.

The study conducted by Correa (2013) on bottom-up technology transformation within families opines that due to the different ways that different generations use social media, it can be difficult for younger daughters-in-law to communicate with their older less technologically savvy mothers-in-law. This is especially true when it pertains to certain topics, where some mothers-in-law feel these should only be discussed face-to-face and not through telephone calls, social media messaging apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc), or video calls (FaceTime, Zoom etc). Correa (2013) further adds, "this shows that digital inequality is still associated with factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status." Kim and Song (2019), compared the interactions between a husband and his wife's parents and found that in comparison, the communication between mothers- and daughters-in-law is more frequent and structured around the roles that they play within the family structure. It is still challenging for mothers-in-law to adapt to and accept the changes that their son's marriage brings into the family structure, such as new forms of communication and cultural differences among other things. These changes are usually the result of the rise in marriages between people who come from different geographic areas.

### 5.2. Roles of social media in a family environment

Drouin et al. (2020) are of the opinion that since social media is utilised for a variety of social and informational purposes, it may also be a pivotal source of information and social support during family gatherings. Furthermore,



Drouin et al. (2020) indicate that although social media is not the only technological platform through which people connect in times of crisis, it can be a crucial means of communication for family and friends.

Cotten, Anderson, and McCullough (2013) argue that the use of social media by older people helps them to keep in touch with their offline and online social networks. Geographic distance is lessened for older people if they use social media to connect with others as geographically dispersed families are increasingly using technology as their main method of maintaining generational ties. Younger daughters-in-law should use this to their advantage and encourage their mothers-in-law to use social media by emphasising its advantages to them, so that their mothers-in-law do not solely rely on face-to-face communication to communicate with their new and younger relatives.

The study conducted by Procentese, Gatti, and Di Napoli (2019) explained that communication through social media characterises modern lifestyle changes, relationships and family interactions. Furthermore, the study emphasised that it is not only the actual impact of social media on family systems that matters, but also parents' perceptions about it, in addition to their feelings about how they are able to manage their own and their children's social media use without family members damaging family relationships and reputations (Procentese et al. 2019). However, He (2019) believes that social media tends to reinforce and strengthen family relationships because of its strong interactive nature.

### **5.3. Effects of social media on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law**

According to Nganase and Basson (2017), the media depicts the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law as a problematic relationship, they further indicate that in-law relationships constantly, directly or indirectly, influence newly formed families. In this regard, Correa (2013) asserts that the relationship between younger daughters-in-law and their older mothers-in-law is then put to the test because of the differences in their communication styles. The younger daughter-in-law's use of technology makes it tougher for the relationship to thrive, this strain adds to the already common perception of this relationship being viewed as unpleasant, stressful and stigmatised by society (Correa, 2013).

Another key finding on factors affecting this relationship, is that mothers-in-law with lower levels of education tend to have a more positive relationship with their daughters-in-law as compared to mothers-in-law with higher levels of education (Husain, Ibrahim, & Mushtaq 2023). Nabievna (2021) states that there has been a decline in the bond between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law, and explains that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law argue frequently, with arguments on social media platforms becoming increasingly prevalent.

Nabievna (2021) further argues that although the history of the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law is not a positive one, a younger daughter-in-law can positively influence her mother-in-law's use of social media to communicate. The daughter-in-law should influence and convince her mother-in-law to make use of social media or messaging apps (Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Telegram etc.) as a primary means of communication, especially when the younger family unit does not reside with their in-laws on a full-time basis.

Nganase and Basson (2019) add that the challenge of balancing the different relational norms and standards of the two families creates the backdrop for the emergence of in-law relationship challenges. In this regard, the study conducted by Greif and Saviet (2020) reveals that some daughters-in-law are disappointed with the way that their relationship with their mother-in-law turned out after years of marriage. Many also had feelings of ambivalence towards their mother-in-law, as they were unclear about what role they had to play within the family (Greif & Saviet, 2020).

### **5.4. Probable ways to foster better online relationships between younger daughters-in-law and their older mothers-in-law**

In their study, Greif and Woolley (2019) found that the majority of daughters-in-law feel positive about their relationship with their mothers-in-law at the beginning of the marriage to their husbands. According to Husain et al. (2023), and as depicted by the findings of the current study, the situation between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is not always as negative as portrayed by the media. Fingerman, Gilligan, Vanderdrift and Pitzer (2012) add that the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law may not always be as conflict-ridden or as difficult as media stereotypes show.

Husain et al. (2023), further emphasise that women have been given a gender-based role to maintain relationships within their families, this is because the mother-daughter-in-law relationship is seen as critical for managing kinship, as women are regarded as the main role-players within the family relationship (Nganase & Basson 2019). Fingerman et al. (2012) add that the dynamics of the early in-law relationship may help to explain subsequent in-law relationship qualities and influence its positive or negative nature.

## **6. Conclusions**

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study probed the subject of social media's influence on the attitudes of younger daughters-in-law towards their mothers-in-law and provided cultural considerations for this phenomenon. Findings suggest that social media use is quickly expanding and families rely on it to stay in touch with their loved ones on a regular basis. This was also confirmed by Yu (2023) who explained that "people can communicate and interact

with family anytime and anywhere through social networks, online communities, chat applications, etc., which is very beneficial to expanding interpersonal relationships.”

Although social media has greatly enhanced the lives of many people, some cultures still value face-to-face interactions, especially in situations where they have to fulfil their traditional practices such as welcoming a daughter-in-law into their family or engaging in specific sensitive conversations. In addition, the study endeavoured to identify the dynamics that affect the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law within the South African context and found that the differences in communication styles, expression of culture, the use of technology and the decline over time in the bond between mothers- and daughters-in-law can all affect this relationship. The rationale for this study is that social media has negatively impacted the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law. In support of the previous statement, Nganase and Basson (2019) argued that “some daughters-in-law expect a negative relationship with their mothers-in-law.”

The study found (within the South African context) that, although some daughters-in-law still follow cultural customs, their heavy reliance on social media to communicate family issues can strain the relationship with their mother-in-law and that is the reason Mohlatlole, Sithole and Shirindi (2017) indicated that “today, family interaction is affected by social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. It seems to be a challenge for some mothers-in-law to adapt to new modes of communication such telephone calls, messaging apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc) and video calls (Zoom, FaceTime etc).”

## 7. Limitations Of The Study

The researchers believe that the varied search terms allowed them to capture all relevant publications in this field, however only 14 peer-reviewed journal articles matched all of the inclusion criteria. The researchers might have missed publications that cannot be identified or indexed with the search terms used or are not published in the databases searched. Further, the study is limited to the South African context. Therefore, the role of family systems should be further explored to understand the mother-and-daughter-in-law relationship. More studies can be conducted to explore the role of culture in marriage and in-law relationships within the South African context. Furthermore, a few studies have already been conducted on this topic within the South African context, thus underscoring the importance of this study. Therefore, social media and social science researchers must continue to conduct studies of this nature to find a solution that could strengthen online in-law relationships. Since this study is exploratory in nature, more studies should be conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of mothers-and daughters-in-law and the dynamics of their relationships on social media platforms. Also, future studies can explore different African and Western cultural customs that can be used to address the challenges within in-law relationships which have been fuelled by content posted on social media platforms.

## 8. Future Directions Of The Study

Based on the findings of the systematic review, the researchers are making the following key recommendations: (1) both daughters- and mothers-in-law should find ways to strengthen and handle their online in-law relationships; (2) daughters-in-law need to rely on their mother-in-law’s guidance, to learn how to engage and interact with others in a manner that represents the family in a positive light and leaves both parties feeling confident and inspired; (3) online freedom should provide both daughter- and mother-in-law with the opportunity to teach each other online social skills; (4) daughters-in-law should foster perceptions about social media’s potentially positive impact on their newly formed family relationship as it emerges; (5) both daughter- and mother-in-law should think before they post content to their social media pages, as what they post is a reflection on both extended families; (6) daughters-in-law should consider the best online method for communicating with their new older mother-in-law; social media developers should establish policies that foster strong relations among family members. This could help to create a strong online relationship between the daughter- and mother-in-law.

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