

Exploring the Relationship between Social Media Usage and Mental Wellbeing of Young Adults in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has transformed communication patterns, social interactions, and access to information, particularly among young adults in Nigeria. While social media provides numerous benefits, including enhanced connectivity, self-expression, and access to mental health resources, excessive and unregulated use has raised concerns about its impact on mental wellbeing. This study explores the relationship between social media usage and the mental health of young Nigerians, focusing on both the positive and negative psychological effects. Using a secondary research methodology, the study examines existing literature on social media addiction, anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and self-esteem issues, as well as the role of online communities in providing emotional support and mental health awareness. The study highlights the need for balanced digital engagement, improved digital literacy, and mental health awareness campaigns tailored to the Nigerian context. Recommendations include the promotion of healthy social media habits, the regulation of harmful online content, the involvement of influencers in mental health advocacy, and the expansion of digital mental health services. By implementing these strategies, young Nigerians can harness the benefits of social media while minimizing its adverse effects on mental wellbeing.

Keywords: Social media, mental wellbeing, young adults, Nigeria, digital literacy, mental health awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has significantly transformed communication, social interactions, and access to information among young adults globally. In Nigeria, the adoption of social media has surged, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, and WhatsApp serving as primary sources of engagement, self-expression, and news consumption (Okon & Etim, 2021; Ezeaka & Ewetuobi, 2024). While social media facilitates connectivity and knowledge sharing, concerns have emerged regarding its potential effects on mental wellbeing, particularly among young adults who constitute a significant portion of active users (Adebayo, 2020; Ezeaka & Okaro, 2024).

Studies suggest that excessive social media usage may contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem due to factors like cyberbullying, social comparison, and digital addiction (Twenge et al., 2018). The phenomenon of “doomscrolling,” where individuals continuously consume negative content, has also been linked to increased stress levels (Chukwu et al., 2022; Onyemaechi et al., 2025). Conversely, social media can serve as a platform for psychological support, enabling users to find communities, access mental health resources, and express their emotions (Adekeye et al., 2021; Ezeoke, & Ezeaka, 2020). The dual nature of social media’s impact underscores the need for a nuanced exploration of its relationship with young adults’ mental wellbeing in Nigeria.

Despite growing research on social media and mental health globally, there remains a gap in localized studies

focusing on Nigeria. Cultural and socio-economic factors influence digital habits and mental health outcomes, necessitating a contextualized analysis (Olanrewaju & Hassan, 2023; Ezeaka & Nwafor, 2022). This study, therefore, aims to examine the relationship between social media usage and the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria, shedding light on both the risks and benefits associated with digital engagement. By understanding these dynamics, policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals can develop strategies to promote healthier social media use among Nigerian youths.

Statement of Problem

The increasing integration of social media into the daily lives of young adults in Nigeria has raised concerns about its potential impact on mental wellbeing. While social media platforms provide opportunities for communication, self-expression, and access to information, emerging evidence suggests that excessive use may be associated with negative psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem (Okon & Etim, 2021; Ezeaka, 2024). Young adults, who are among the most active social media users, often experience pressure to conform to idealized online personas, engage in social comparison, and navigate cyberbullying, all of which can contribute to mental distress (Adebayo, 2020).

Despite global research on the effects of social media on mental health, there remains a lack of localized studies that specifically explore this relationship within the Nigerian context. Factors such as cultural influences, socio-economic disparities, and limited mental health awareness may shape the way Nigerian youths experience and respond to social media-related stressors (Olanrewaju & Hassan, 2023). Additionally, while some studies acknowledge the potential benefits of social media, such as providing access to support networks and mental health resources, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how these benefits balance against the risks for Nigerian young adults (Adekeye et al., 2021; Onyemaechi et al., 2022).

Given the growing prevalence of mental health concerns among young people in Nigeria, it is crucial to understand the extent to which social media contributes to these challenges. Without clear empirical data, policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals may struggle to implement effective interventions that promote responsible digital engagement while mitigating its negative effects. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating the relationship between social media usage and the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria, offering insights that can inform future policies and mental health initiatives.

Objectives of the study

The following objectives guided the study:

1. To examine the impact of social media usage on the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria.
2. To identify the common psychological challenges associated with excessive social media use among young adults in Nigeria.
3. To assess the positive influences of social media on the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which provides a relevant framework for understanding the relationship between social media usage and the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria. Developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), UGT posits that media users actively engage with communication platforms to satisfy specific needs, such as information-seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity formation. Unlike traditional media effects theories that emphasize passive audience reception, UGT highlights the agency of users in selecting and using media content based on their psychological and social motivations (Rubin, 2009; Onyemaechi & Okafor, 2025).

In the context of this study, UGT helps explain why young adults in Nigeria engage with social media and how their usage patterns influence their mental wellbeing. For instance, some individuals turn to social media for

social support and community-building, which may enhance their psychological health (Adekeye et al., 2021; Onyemaechi et al., 2018). Others, however, may develop compulsive usage patterns driven by the need for validation, fear of missing out (FOMO), or social comparison, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem (Adebayo, 2020). The theory, therefore, provides a lens through which the dual effects of social media both positive and negative on mental wellbeing can be analyzed.

By applying UGT, this study assesses whether young adults in Nigeria use social media in ways that contribute to their emotional and psychological health or whether their usage leads to negative mental health outcomes. Understanding these motivations and gratifications offer valuable insights for developing strategies to promote healthier digital habits among Nigerian youths.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a secondary research method to explore the relationship between social media usage and the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria. Secondary research involves collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing existing data from scholarly articles, books, reports, and other credible sources relevant to the study (Johnston, 2017). This method is appropriate because it allows for a comprehensive examination of previous research findings, theoretical perspectives, and empirical evidence on the subject without conducting primary data collection.

The study draws from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, institutional reports, and policy documents that discuss the effects of social media on mental wellbeing, particularly among young adults

Using secondary research offers several advantages, such as access to a vast body of knowledge, saving time and resources, and enabling an in-depth examination of existing scholarly perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Usage and Its Impact on Mental Wellbeing

Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of young adults, profoundly shaping their interactions, perceptions, and overall mental wellbeing (Adikuru & Obiora, 2021; Obiora & Adikuru 2024). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok serve as primary avenues for communication, entertainment, and self-expression (Ezeaka, 2024; Obiweluzo et al., 2017). However, while social media provides opportunities for personal growth and connectivity, studies suggest that its excessive use is linked to negative psychological outcomes. According to Twenge et al. (2018), high levels of social media engagement correlate with increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, particularly among young people. This association is largely attributed to the pressure of online validation, constant social comparisons, and exposure to unrealistic lifestyle portrayals that can undermine self-esteem (Adebayo, 2020; Abonyi et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, social media usage among young adults continues to grow, driven by increased smartphone penetration and internet accessibility (Nwodu, Ezeali & Ezeaka, 2022; Nwodu, Ezeoke & Ezeaka, 2021). While digital engagement has facilitated educational advancement, career networking, and advocacy, it has also raised concerns regarding mental health implications (Enemuo, Ezeanyi & Ezeaka, 2019). A study by Chukwu et al. (2022) indicates that many young Nigerians experience emotional distress due to online interactions, particularly when exposed to cyberbullying, misinformation, and digital harassment. Additionally, excessive time spent on social media has been found to disrupt sleep patterns, decrease productivity, and reduce in-person social interactions, all of which contribute to deteriorating mental wellbeing (Adekeye et al., 2021; Abonyi et al., 2024).

Moreover, the psychological impact of social media is often influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors unique to Nigeria. Given the high levels of youth unemployment and socio-political instability, many young Nigerians use social media as an escape or coping mechanism (Olanrewaju & Hassan, 2023). However, over-reliance on digital platforms can lead to emotional exhaustion and a sense of detachment from reality. These findings highlight the complex nature of social media's impact on mental health and the need for a balanced approach to digital engagement. While social media serves as a valuable tool for self-expression and awareness,

its unregulated use poses significant risks that must be addressed through targeted interventions and public awareness campaigns (Ezeaka & Ochuba, 2024; Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2022).

Psychological Challenges Associated with Excessive Social Media Use

Excessive social media use has been widely linked to various psychological challenges, including addiction, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Many young adults become overly reliant on social media for entertainment, validation, and social interactions, which can lead to compulsive usage patterns. According to Andreassen et al. (2017), social media addiction shares similar characteristics with other behavioral addictions, such as gambling, including withdrawal symptoms, mood alterations, and neglect of real-life responsibilities. In Nigeria, where social media is deeply embedded in youth culture, prolonged engagement with digital platforms often disrupts academic performance, work productivity, and face-to-face relationships (Olanrewaju & Hassan, 2023).

One of the most concerning psychological consequences of excessive social media use is anxiety and depression. Many young people spend hours scrolling through curated online content, comparing their lives with idealized representations of success, beauty, and happiness. This constant exposure to unrealistic portrayals often fosters feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and dissatisfaction (Adebayo, 2020). A study conducted by Adekeye et al. (2021) found that Nigerian youths who frequently engage in social comparison on platforms like Instagram and TikTok are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, the pressure to maintain an appealing online presence can lead to stress, as individuals strive to meet societal expectations and gain social validation through likes, comments, and shares.

Another significant challenge associated with excessive social media use is cyberbullying. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying extends beyond physical spaces, making it difficult for victims to escape harassment. In Nigeria, young adults frequently encounter online abuse, trolling, and doxxing, which can have serious emotional and psychological effects. Chukwu et al. (2022) highlight that victims of cyberbullying often experience heightened stress, loneliness, and, in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. The anonymity of the internet emboldens perpetrators, making online harassment a persistent issue that negatively affects mental wellbeing.

Additionally, excessive social media use has been linked to sleep disturbances, which further impact mental health. Many young Nigerians stay up late engaging with content, chatting, or watching videos, leading to disrupted sleep patterns and chronic fatigue. Poor sleep quality has been associated with increased levels of stress, irritability, and cognitive impairments (Twenge et al., 2018; Abonyi et al., 2023). A study by Olanrewaju and Hassan (2023) found that Nigerian university students who spend more than six hours on social media daily are more likely to experience insomnia and difficulty concentrating on academic tasks. This highlights the importance of digital literacy programs that educate young adults on the importance of balanced social media usage and self-care practices.

The psychological effects of excessive social media use underscore the need for greater awareness and regulatory measures. While social media provides an avenue for self-expression and connectivity, its unregulated use poses significant risks to mental health. Implementing mental health education programs, promoting responsible social media habits, and fostering online safety measures can help mitigate the negative effects of excessive digital engagement. Addressing these psychological challenges is crucial in ensuring that social media remains a tool for empowerment rather than a source of distress for young Nigerians.

Positive Influences of Social Media on Mental Wellbeing

Despite the growing concerns about the negative psychological effects of excessive social media use, it is important to acknowledge that social media also has several positive influences on mental wellbeing, particularly among young adults. In Nigeria, social media platforms serve as important tools for social support, self-expression, mental health awareness, and community building. Many young people use digital platforms not only for entertainment but also to seek emotional support, connect with like-minded individuals, and access valuable mental health resources (Naslund et al., 2020).

One of the key benefits of social media is its role in fostering social support networks. Many young Nigerians turn to online communities to share their struggles and find comfort among individuals who have had similar experiences. A study by Adekeye et al. (2021) found that young people who engage with online peer support groups tend to report lower levels of stress and anxiety. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where mental health issues are often stigmatized, and access to professional psychological services is limited. Online platforms provide a safe space for individuals to discuss their emotions, seek advice, and receive encouragement from peers, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness. Communication is the vital force that powers social interaction and collective growth (Ezeoke, Ezeaka & Nwodu 2020).

Social media has also played a crucial role in raising awareness about mental health issues and challenging societal stigma. In Nigeria, campaigns such as #MentalHealthAwareness and #EndTheStigma have gained traction on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, encouraging open conversations about mental wellbeing. These online movements have helped to educate young Nigerians about the importance of mental health and the need to seek help when necessary (Olanrewaju & Hassan, 2023). By promoting mental health literacy, social media has contributed to the normalization of discussions around emotional wellbeing and has encouraged more people to prioritize their mental health (Ezeaka, 2019).

Furthermore, social media serves as a creative outlet that enhances self-expression and personal growth. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram allow young people to share their talents, voice their opinions, and engage in meaningful conversations about issues that matter to them (Obiora, Uche & Adikuru, 2025). Okon and Etim (2021) note that creative self-expression on social media can be therapeutic, helping individuals cope with stress and build a sense of identity. Engaging in positive online interactions, participating in digital advocacy, and expressing oneself through creative content contribute to improved self-esteem and psychological resilience.

In addition to providing social and emotional support, social media has also facilitated access to mental health resources. Many organizations and professionals now use social media to share valuable information about coping strategies, therapy options, and mental wellness tips. Young Nigerians who may not have access to formal mental health services can benefit from free online resources, including virtual counseling sessions, meditation apps, and self-help materials (Naslund et al., 2020). This digital accessibility is particularly important in a country where mental health facilities remain inadequate and unaffordable for many individuals.

Despite these benefits, it is crucial to promote a balanced approach to social media usage. While digital platforms offer opportunities for social connection and self-improvement, excessive engagement without proper regulation can still lead to adverse mental health outcomes. Encouraging responsible social media habits, promoting digital wellbeing initiatives, and fostering healthy online interactions can help maximize the positive effects of social media while minimizing its risks. By leveraging the benefits of social media responsibly, young Nigerians can enhance their mental wellbeing and build stronger, more supportive online communities.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the relationship between social media usage and the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria, highlighting both the positive and negative psychological effects of digital engagement. While social media serves as a vital tool for communication, self-expression, and mental health awareness, excessive and unregulated use has been associated with issues such as anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and sleep disturbances. The psychological challenges faced by young Nigerians due to prolonged social media exposure emphasize the need for increased awareness and interventions that promote digital wellbeing.

At the same time, social media provides significant mental health benefits, including access to emotional support networks, mental health education, and opportunities for creative self-expression. Online communities offer a safe space for young people to share their struggles, access valuable mental health resources, and challenge societal stigma surrounding mental illnesses. These positive aspects suggest that when used mindfully, social media can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing psychological resilience and fostering a sense of belonging among young Nigerians.

To maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its risks, it is essential to promote responsible digital habits. This includes encouraging time management strategies, digital literacy programs, and the establishment of online safety measures to protect users from cyberbullying and harmful content. Additionally, mental health professionals, policymakers, and educators must collaborate to integrate mental health awareness initiatives into digital spaces. By adopting a balanced approach to social media use, young Nigerians can leverage its advantages while safeguarding their mental wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed to address the impact of social media usage on the mental wellbeing of young adults in Nigeria:

1. **Digital Literacy and Mental Health Awareness Campaigns:**

There is a need for nationwide campaigns that educate young Nigerians on responsible social media usage and its impact on mental health. The Nigerian government, educational institutions, and civil society organizations should collaborate to create programs that teach digital wellbeing, media literacy, and online safety. Schools and universities should integrate mental health education into their curriculum, equipping students with coping mechanisms to manage social media-induced stress and anxiety.

2. **Regulation of Harmful Online Content and Cyberbullying Prevention**

Given the prevalence of cyberbullying, misinformation, and harmful content on Nigerian social media platforms, the government and social media companies should implement stricter content moderation policies. Laws against cyberbullying should be enforced more effectively, and reporting mechanisms should be made more accessible to victims. Additionally, digital platforms should partner with mental health organizations to provide users with support services, such as helplines and counseling referrals.

3. **Encouraging Healthy Social Media Habits through Influencer Advocacy**

Nigerian social media influencers and celebrities, who hold significant influence over young audiences, should actively promote digital wellbeing and mental health awareness. Influencers can use their platforms to advocate for responsible social media consumption, self-care practices, and offline engagement. By leveraging their reach, they can help change the narrative around unrealistic beauty standards, online validation, and the pressure to conform to social media trends.

4. **Improving Access to Mental Health Services through Digital Platforms**

Since mental health services remain underdeveloped in Nigeria, technology should be harnessed to expand access to psychological support. The government, NGOs, and private sectors should invest in mental health mobile applications, online therapy sessions, and AI-powered chatbots that provide mental health guidance. Additionally, social media platforms can integrate features that encourage users to take breaks, monitor screen time, and access mental health resources.

5. **School-Based Mental Health Clubs:** Schools and universities can establish Mental Health Awareness Clubs, where students receive training on identifying stress, anxiety, and depression. These clubs can host peer-support sessions, invite mental health professionals for talks, and create awareness through social media.

6. **No Social Media Days Initiatives:** Universities can implement "No Social Media Wednesdays", encouraging students to engage in offline activities such as mindfulness sessions, sports, and group discussions on mental wellbeing. Schools can organize "Digital Detox Challenges", rewarding students who minimize screen time and engage in real-life social interactions.

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