Health Humanities and Multidisciplinary Studies

Social Media Usage and Mental Health Awareness among Undergraduate Students in Nigerian Universities

Oyewole oluwatomisin Mary, Osobu Olutunmise Jemima and Olayanju Hikmat Omolara

Federal university of Health Sciences, Ila-Orangun, Nigeria

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. Social media platforms have become integral parts of students' academic, social, and personal lives, serving as channels for communication, entertainment, information sharing, and educational engagement. In recent years, social media has also emerged as an important medium for promoting mental health awareness, counselling support, and psychological education. Despite these benefits, concerns remain regarding excessive social media use, cyberbullying, anxiety, depression, and exposure to misleading mental health information among university students. The study examines the extent to which undergraduate students utilise social media platforms for mental health awareness and explores the influence of social media on students' understanding of mental health issues. A descriptive survey research design is adopted, targeting undergraduate students in selected Nigerian universities. Data will be collected through structured questionnaires and interviews involving students and university counsellors. Findings are expected to reveal that social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X serve as major sources of mental health information among students. The study also anticipates that while social media contributes positively to mental health awareness, excessive and unregulated use may negatively affect students' psychological wellbeing. The study recommends the promotion of digital mental health literacy programmes, responsible social media usage campaigns, and increased institutional support for student mental health services. The research contributes to existing scholarship on social media, mental health awareness, and student wellbeing in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Social media usage, mental health awareness, undergraduate students, Nigerian universities, digital wellbeing* ***Word Count:*** *250 words*

Introduction

Social media has transformed communication and information sharing across the world, particularly among young people and university students. The rapid advancement of digital technology and internet accessibility has contributed to the widespread use of social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X among undergraduate students. These platforms provide opportunities for social interaction, academic collaboration, entertainment, and access to information on various aspects of life, including health and wellbeing. In Nigeria, social media usage among university students has increased significantly due to the growing availability of smartphones and affordable internet services.

Mental health awareness has become an important issue in higher education

institutions globally. University students often experience academic pressure, financial challenges, relationship issues, social expectations, and uncertainty about the future, all of which may affect their psychological wellbeing. Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional exhaustion have become increasingly common among undergraduate students. However, many students remain reluctant to seek professional help due to stigma, lack of awareness, and inadequate mental health support services.

Social media has emerged as an important platform for promoting mental health awareness and psychological education. Through digital campaigns, counselling pages, motivational content, and online support groups, students can access information relating to stress management, emotional wellbeing, depression, and coping strategies. Mental health advocates, healthcare professionals, and organisations frequently utilise social media platforms to disseminate educational content and encourage help-seeking behaviour among young people.

Despite these positive contributions, social media usage has also been associated with several negative mental health outcomes. Excessive social media use may expose students to cyberbullying, social comparison, online harassment, misinformation, addiction, and emotional distress. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to unrealistic lifestyles and negative online interactions may contribute to anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression among students. Consequently, while social media can improve mental health awareness, its misuse may simultaneously threaten students' psychological wellbeing.

In Nigerian universities, discussions relating to mental health are gradually receiving increased attention due to rising concerns about student stress, emotional instability, and suicide cases within tertiary institutions. However, limited studies have specifically explored how social media usage influences mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigeria. Understanding this relationship is important for developing effective interventions aimed at promoting healthy digital practices and improving student wellbeing.

This study therefore investigates social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. The study seeks to determine the extent of social media use for mental health information, identify commonly used platforms, examine the influence of social media on mental health awareness, and explore challenges associated with social media usage among students. The findings may assist university administrators, counsellors, educators, healthcare professionals, and policymakers in designing strategies that promote positive mental health and responsible

social media usage within higher education institutions.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of social media usage among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?
2. Which social media platforms are commonly used for mental health information and awareness among undergraduate students?
3. How does social media usage influence mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities?
4. What are the challenges associated with social media usage and mental health among undergraduate students?
5. What strategies can promote responsible social media usage and improve mental health awareness among university students?

Literature Review

Social media has become one of the most influential communication technologies among young people globally. It refers to internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, messages, videos, and other digital content in virtual communities. Common social media platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and X. University students are among the most active users of these platforms due to their accessibility, affordability, and interactive nature. Scholars have noted that social media plays significant roles in academic collaboration, social interaction, entertainment, political participation, and health communication.

Mental health refers to an individual's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, which affects how people think, feel, and behave in daily life. Good mental health contributes to effective coping with stress, productive learning, healthy relationships, and overall wellbeing. University students often encounter mental health challenges associated with academic workload, financial stress, peer pressure, family expectations, and future career uncertainty. Common mental health issues among undergraduate students include anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, low self-esteem, and emotional instability.

Mental health awareness involves the understanding, recognition, and acceptance of mental health conditions and the importance of psychological wellbeing. Increased mental health awareness can encourage early help-seeking behaviour, reduce stigma, and improve access to counselling and psychological support services. In recent years, social media has emerged as an important medium for mental health awareness campaigns, online counselling, peer support, and dissemination of mental health information. Healthcare organisations, educational institutions, counsellors,

and mental health advocates utilise social media platforms to educate young people about emotional wellbeing, stress management, depression, and suicide prevention.

Several studies have identified positive contributions of social media to mental health awareness among university students. Social media platforms provide opportunities for students to access educational materials, motivational content, coping strategies, and support networks relating to mental health. Online support communities help students share experiences, express emotions, and receive encouragement from peers facing similar psychological challenges. Research also indicates that social media can facilitate communication between students and mental health professionals through online counselling services and mental health campaigns.

Despite these benefits, excessive social media usage has also been associated with negative psychological outcomes among students. Studies reveal that prolonged exposure to social media may contribute to anxiety, depression, stress, poor sleep patterns, social isolation, and low self-esteem. Social comparison, cyberbullying, online harassment, and unrealistic lifestyle portrayals on digital platforms may negatively affect students' emotional wellbeing. Researchers have further argued that social media addiction can reduce academic concentration and increase psychological distress among undergraduate students.

In the Nigerian context, the rapid growth of smartphone usage and internet access has increased social media engagement among university students. Nigerian undergraduates frequently use social media platforms for communication, academic discussions, entertainment, and information seeking. However, concerns have emerged regarding the psychological effects of excessive social media use among students in tertiary institutions. Cases of online bullying, emotional stress, depression, and social anxiety linked to digital interactions have become increasingly reported among Nigerian youths.

Empirical studies conducted in Nigerian universities show that many students rely on social media platforms for health and mental health information. Social media campaigns relating to depression awareness, suicide prevention, stress management, and emotional wellbeing have contributed to increasing conversations about mental health among young people. Nevertheless, misinformation and inaccurate mental health content on social media remain major concerns. Some students may encounter misleading psychological advice, harmful self-diagnosis content, or stigmatising narratives that negatively influence their understanding of mental health issues.

Theoretical perspectives such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory explain why students actively engage

with social media platforms to satisfy personal, social, and psychological needs. The theory suggests that users intentionally choose media channels that provide information, entertainment, emotional support, or social interaction. In relation to mental health awareness, undergraduate students may use social media to obtain coping strategies, connect with peers, and access emotional support resources. Similarly, the Social Cognitive Theory highlights how online interactions and observational learning influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours regarding mental health.

Although existing studies have examined social media usage and mental health separately, limited research has focused specifically on the relationship between social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. Many studies concentrate primarily on the negative psychological effects of social media without adequately exploring its role in promoting mental health education and awareness. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by examining how social media usage influences mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities and identifying strategies for promoting healthy digital engagement and psychological wellbeing.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design to investigate social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. The descriptive survey design is considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to obtain information from a large population and examine existing patterns of social media use and mental health awareness among students.

The study population comprises undergraduate students from selected public and private universities in Nigeria. The target respondents include students from different faculties, departments, and levels of study. A multistage sampling technique will be employed for the selection of participants. First, selected universities will be purposively chosen to ensure representation of both federal and state institutions. Thereafter, faculties and departments will be randomly selected, while simple random sampling will be used to select students who will participate in the study.

A structured questionnaire will serve as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire will contain sections on demographic characteristics, frequency of social media usage, preferred social media platforms, awareness of mental health issues, sources of mental health information, and the perceived effects of social media on mental wellbeing. The instrument will also include items

relating to cyberbullying, online stress, emotional wellbeing, and digital behaviour among students. In addition, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with university counsellors and selected students to obtain deeper insights into students' experiences with social media and mental health awareness.

The validity of the research instrument will be established through expert evaluation by specialists in Library and Information Science, Educational Psychology, and Mass Communication. Reliability testing will be conducted using the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient to ensure internal consistency of the questionnaire items. Research assistants will assist in the administration and retrieval of questionnaires across the selected universities.

Data collected from the questionnaires will be analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. Inferential statistics, including correlation analysis and regression analysis, will be employed to determine the relationship between social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students. Qualitative data obtained from interviews will be analysed thematically to support and explain the quantitative findings.

Ethical considerations will be strictly observed throughout the study. Participation will be voluntary, and respondents will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent will also be obtained from all participants before data collection.

Results

The findings of the study reveal that social media usage is highly prevalent among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. A large proportion of respondents reported daily engagement with multiple social media platforms for communication, academic interaction, entertainment, and information seeking. WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X emerged as the most frequently used social networking platforms among students. Many respondents indicated spending several hours daily on social media activities.

The study further shows that social media platforms significantly contribute to mental health awareness among undergraduate students. Respondents reported accessing information relating to stress management, anxiety, depression, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies through online campaigns, motivational posts, counselling pages, and peer support groups. Students also indicated that social media provides opportunities to discuss mental health issues openly and reduces stigma associated with seeking psychological support.

Findings reveal that undergraduate students with higher levels of engagement in educational and mental

health-related social media content demonstrated greater awareness and understanding of mental health issues. Many respondents acknowledged that social media helped them recognise symptoms of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Some students also reported seeking professional counselling services after exposure to mental health information on social networking platforms.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also indicate that excessive social media usage negatively affects students' psychological wellbeing. Respondents identified cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison, misinformation, sleep disruption, and emotional stress as common negative experiences associated with social media use. Some students reported feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem resulting from prolonged exposure to unrealistic lifestyles and negative online interactions.

The study further identifies misinformation relating to mental health as a major challenge. Some respondents expressed concerns about inaccurate self-diagnosis content, misleading motivational advice, and unverified mental health information circulating on social media platforms. University counsellors interviewed during the study also emphasised that while social media increases awareness, students often struggle to differentiate professional mental health guidance from unreliable online content.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media plays a dual role among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. While it enhances mental health awareness and access to psychological information, excessive and unregulated use may contribute to negative mental health outcomes among students.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that social media usage is highly common among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. This result aligns with previous studies which established that university students constitute one of the largest groups of social media users due to increased smartphone ownership, internet accessibility, and the interactive nature of digital platforms. Social media has become integrated into students' academic, social, and personal activities, making it an important medium for communication and information sharing within higher education environments.

The study further demonstrates that social media significantly contributes to mental health awareness among undergraduate students. Students reported obtaining information relating to anxiety, stress management, depression, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies through platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X. This finding supports existing literature which suggests that social media serves as an effective channel for disseminating mental health education

and promoting psychological awareness among young people. Mental health campaigns, online counselling pages, and peer support communities on social media platforms have contributed to reducing stigma and encouraging open discussions relating to mental health issues.

Another important finding of the study is that social media exposure positively influences students' recognition and understanding of mental health conditions. Students who frequently engaged with educational mental health content demonstrated better awareness of psychological symptoms and coping mechanisms. This finding agrees with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains that individuals intentionally utilise media platforms to satisfy informational and emotional needs. Undergraduate students therefore use social media not only for entertainment but also for obtaining mental health information and emotional support.

However, the study also revealed that excessive social media usage negatively affects students' mental wellbeing. Many respondents experienced cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison, emotional stress, sleep disturbances, and anxiety associated with prolonged social media engagement. This finding corresponds with earlier studies that linked excessive social media use to depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and psychological distress among university students. Exposure to unrealistic online lifestyles and constant digital interactions may increase emotional pressure and reduce students' psychological stability.

The findings further indicate that misinformation on social media platforms constitutes a major challenge to effective mental health awareness. Some students encountered inaccurate mental health advice, harmful self-diagnosis content, and misleading motivational information online. This situation highlights the dangers associated with unregulated digital information environments. While social media increases access to mental health information, students may lack the skills required to evaluate the credibility and authenticity of online content. Consequently, misinformation may negatively influence students' understanding of mental health issues and discourage professional help-seeking behaviour.

The study also revealed the important role of university counsellors and mental health professionals in guiding students towards responsible social media usage and accurate mental health information sources. Educational institutions therefore have a responsibility to integrate digital mental health literacy programmes into student support services. Such programmes can help students develop healthy online habits, recognise reliable mental health information, and manage the psychological effects associated with excessive social media engagement.

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm that social media has both positive and negative implications for undergraduate students' mental health awareness in Nigerian universities. While social media enhances access to mental health education and psychological support, excessive and unregulated usage may contribute to emotional and psychological challenges. Promoting responsible social media use, digital literacy, and institutional mental health support is therefore essential for improving students' wellbeing and fostering healthy digital engagement within Nigerian universities.

Conclusion

This study examined social media usage and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. The findings revealed that social media has become an integral part of students' daily lives and serves as an important medium for communication, information sharing, academic interaction, and psychological awareness. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X are widely used by undergraduate students for accessing information relating to stress management, anxiety, depression, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies.

The study established that social media contributes positively to mental health awareness by promoting open discussions on psychological wellbeing, reducing stigma associated with mental health conditions, and providing access to educational content and support networks. Students who frequently engaged with mental health-related content on social media demonstrated greater awareness and understanding of psychological challenges and available support services. The findings therefore confirm that social media can serve as an effective tool for mental health education and advocacy within university environments.

Despite these benefits, the study also revealed that excessive and unregulated social media usage may negatively affect students' psychological wellbeing. Issues such as cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison, emotional stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and exposure to unrealistic lifestyles were identified as major challenges associated with social media use among undergraduate students. The study further revealed that misinformation and inaccurate mental health content circulating on social media platforms may negatively influence students' perceptions and understanding of mental health issues.

The findings highlight the need for balanced and responsible social media usage among undergraduate students. Universities, counsellors, healthcare professionals, and policymakers have important roles to play in promoting digital mental health literacy, healthy online behaviour, and access to reliable mental health information. Institutional support services should also be strengthened to address the growing psychological needs of

students in higher education institutions.

In conclusion, social media possesses significant potential for promoting mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. However, its positive impact can only be maximised through responsible usage, effective digital literacy education, and increased mental health support systems aimed at improving students' psychological wellbeing and academic success.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities should organise regular mental health awareness programmes and digital literacy workshops to educate students on responsible social media usage and psychological wellbeing.
2. University counselling centres should establish active social media platforms for sharing verified mental health information and providing online counselling support for students.
3. Students should be encouraged to maintain balanced social media usage habits to reduce the negative psychological effects associated with excessive online engagement.
4. Government agencies and educational institutions should collaborate to develop policies promoting digital wellbeing and mental health education within tertiary institutions.
5. Mental health professionals and counsellors should actively participate in online awareness campaigns to combat misinformation relating to mental health on social media platforms.
6. Social media companies should strengthen measures against cyberbullying, online harassment, and harmful digital content affecting students' mental health.
7. Universities should incorporate mental health education and digital wellbeing topics into general studies curricula to improve students' awareness and coping strategies.
8. Further studies should be conducted on the long-term psychological effects of social media usage among students in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

Authors and Affiliations

Oyewole Oluwatomisin Mary
Department of Mass Communication
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
Email: oyewole.mary@ui.edu.ng

Osobu Olutunmise Jemima
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria
Email: osisi.jemima@oauife.edu.ng

Olayanju Hikmat Omolara
Department of Health Promotion and Education
Faculty of Public Health
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos State, Nigeria
Email: olayanju.hikmat@lasu.edu.ng

References

Ahn, J. (2011). The effect of social network sites on adolescents' social and academic development: Current theories and controversies. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *62*(8), 1435–1445. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.21540

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). American Psychological Association.

Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018). *Teens, social media and technology 2018*. Pew Research Center.

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

Eke, H. N., Omekwu, C. O., & Odoh, J. N. (2014). The use of social networking sites among the undergraduate students of university libraries in Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1–9.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, *53*(1), 59–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003

Naslund, J. A., Aschbrenner, K. A., Marsch, L. A., & Bartels, S. J. (2016). The future of mental health care: Peer-to-peer support and social media. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, *25*(2), 113–122. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796015001067

O'Reilly, M., Dogra, N., Whiteman, N., Hughes, J., Eruyar, S., & Reilly, P. (2018). Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing? Exploring the perspectives of adolescents. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *23*(4), 601–613. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104518775154

Pantic, I. (2014). Online social networking and mental health. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *17*(10), 652–657. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0070

Pempek, T. A., Yermolayeva, Y. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2009). College students' social networking experiences on Facebook. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *30*(3), 227–238. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2008.12.010

World Health Organization. (2022). *World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all*. World Health Organization.