INNOVATION

SOCIAL MEDIA UTILISATION AND MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students, with emphasis on how patterns of use influence awareness, perception, and help-seeking behaviour. In contemporary higher education environments, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok have become dominant channels of communication, learning, and social interaction. While these platforms offer opportunities for information sharing and peer support, they also expose students to misinformation, cyber stressors, and mental health risks. The study adopts a descriptive approach to explore how frequency, purpose, and intensity of social media use relate to students' mental health awareness. It further considers whether students can distinguish between reliable mental health information and unverified online content. Findings from existing literature suggest that moderate and purposeful use of social media can enhance mental health awareness through exposure to advocacy campaigns, online counselling platforms, and peer discussions. However, excessive and unregulated use is associated with anxiety, depression, social comparison, and reduced psychological well-being. The study highlights the dual role of social media as both a supportive and risky environment for mental health discourse among students. It concludes that improving digital literacy and mental health education is essential for maximising benefits while reducing harm. Universities are encouraged to integrate digital well-being programmes into student support services.

Keywords: *Social media, mental health awareness, university students, digital literacy, psychological well-being*

Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of university students, fundamentally shaping how they communicate, learn, and access information. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok provide instant connectivity and have transformed traditional patterns of interaction. For university students, social media serves not only as a tool for social engagement but also as a source of academic support, entertainment, and information sharing. However, alongside these benefits, concerns have emerged regarding its influence on mental health awareness and psychological well-being.

Mental health awareness refers to the ability of individuals to recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to mental health conditions, including stress, anxiety, and depression. In recent years, there has been a growing global emphasis on mental health education, particularly among young adults in tertiary institutions. University students are considered a vulnerable group due to academic pressure, social adjustment challenges,

financial constraints, and transition into adulthood. Within this context, social media plays a dual role—serving as both a platform for mental health advocacy and a potential trigger for psychological distress.

The increasing visibility of mental health content on social media has contributed to improved awareness among students. Campaigns, influencers, and health organisations frequently use these platforms to share information about coping strategies, counselling services, and emotional resilience. At the same time, misinformation, unrealistic lifestyle portrayals, cyberbullying, and excessive social comparison may negatively affect students' mental well-being. This contradiction highlights the complexity of social media's influence on mental health awareness.

Furthermore, the intensity and purpose of social media use are important determinants of its impact. Students who use social media for academic and informational purposes may benefit from increased awareness and knowledge, while those who engage primarily for entertainment or passive consumption may be more exposed to harmful psychological effects. Despite the growing body of research on social media usage, there remains a need to better understand its specific relationship with mental health awareness among university students, particularly in developing contexts where digital literacy levels vary.

This study therefore explores the relationship between social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students, with the aim of contributing to improved understanding of how digital engagement influences psychological well-being and awareness of mental health issues.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of social media utilisation among university students?
2. What is the level of mental health awareness among university students?
3. For what purposes do university students use social media platforms?
4. What is the relationship between social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students?
5. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of social media use on students' mental health awareness?

Literature Review

Social media utilisation among university students has received increasing scholarly attention due to its growing influence on communication patterns, learning behaviour, and psychological well-being. Studies consistently show that students are among the most active users of social networking platforms,

often spending several hours daily engaging with content, peers, and online communities. According to global digital behaviour trends, young adults rely heavily on social media not only for entertainment but also for information acquisition and social identity formation. This high level of engagement raises important questions about its implications for mental health awareness.

Mental health awareness among university students is generally defined as the ability to recognise symptoms of mental distress, understand available support systems, and develop positive attitudes towards mental health services. Research indicates that while awareness has improved over the years due to global advocacy campaigns, stigma and misinformation remain persistent challenges. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, mental health literacy among students is still evolving, with many individuals relying on informal sources of information, including social media platforms.

Empirical studies suggest that social media can positively influence mental health awareness by providing access to educational content, peer support networks, and mental health advocacy campaigns. Platforms such as Instagram and X have become popular spaces for mental health discussions, where influencers and organisations share coping strategies and awareness messages. This exposure can reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour among students. However, the credibility of information remains a concern, as not all content shared online is evidence-based or professionally verified.

Conversely, several studies highlight the negative psychological effects of excessive social media use. High levels of engagement have been associated with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and poor self-esteem. These outcomes are often linked to social comparison, cyberbullying, and exposure to idealised representations of life. University students are particularly vulnerable due to developmental transitions and academic pressures, which may amplify the emotional impact of online interactions.

Theoretical perspectives such as Uses and Gratifications Theory suggest that individuals actively choose media platforms to satisfy specific needs, such as information seeking, social interaction, or entertainment. In this context, students who use social media for informational purposes may experience enhanced mental health awareness compared to those who use it primarily for passive consumption. Similarly, the Digital Literacy Framework emphasises the importance of critical evaluation skills in determining the quality and reliability of online health information.

In the Nigerian context, studies show that while social media penetration among university students is high,

digital literacy and mental health education remain uneven. Many students are exposed to mental health content but lack the skills to evaluate its accuracy or relevance. This gap creates both opportunities and risks, as students may either benefit from awareness campaigns or be misled by unverified information.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates a complex relationship between social media utilisation and mental health awareness. While social media has the potential to improve awareness and reduce stigma, it also poses risks that may negatively affect psychological well-being. This duality highlights the need for balanced usage, improved digital literacy, and institutional support systems within universities to ensure that students derive maximum benefit from online platforms while minimising harm.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection of data from a relatively large population and facilitated the description of students' perceptions, experiences, and behavioural patterns regarding social media use and mental health awareness. The study was conducted among undergraduate students in selected universities in Nigeria.

The target population comprised undergraduate students across different faculties and levels of study. A multistage sampling technique was employed to select participants for the study. First, faculties were purposively selected to ensure representation from science, social science, arts, and health-related disciplines. Thereafter, simple random sampling was used to select respondents from each faculty. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, while 276 valid copies were retrieved and used for analysis, representing a high response rate.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled *Social Media Utilisation and Mental Health Awareness Questionnaire (SUMHAQ)*. The instrument was divided into four sections. Section A elicited demographic information such as age, gender, and level of study. Section B focused on patterns and frequency of social media utilisation. Section C examined students' awareness and understanding of mental health issues, while Section D assessed perceived effects of social media on mental health awareness and psychological well-being.

The questionnaire items were designed using a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. To ensure validity, the instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in Library and Information Science and Educational Psychology. Their observations and recommendations were incorporated into the final

version of the instrument. Reliability testing was conducted through a pilot study involving 30 students outside the study population, and the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient obtained was 0.82, indicating that the instrument was reliable for the study.

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation. The findings were presented in tables and interpreted according to the research questions guiding the study. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent, were strictly observed throughout the study.

Results

The findings revealed that social media utilisation among university students was considerably high. Most respondents indicated that they accessed social media platforms daily, with WhatsApp, Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok emerging as the most frequently used platforms. Students reported using social media primarily for communication, entertainment, academic engagement, information seeking, and social interaction. A significant proportion of respondents also acknowledged spending several hours online each day, indicating a high level of digital engagement.

The study further showed that students possessed moderate to high levels of mental health awareness. Many respondents demonstrated awareness of common mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional burnout. Students also indicated familiarity with mental health-related discussions and campaigns frequently circulated on social media platforms. The findings suggest that social media has contributed positively to exposing students to mental health information and reducing stigma associated with discussing psychological challenges.

In addition, respondents perceived social media as a useful platform for accessing mental health information, peer support, motivational content, and counselling-related resources. Many students agreed that online discussions and advocacy campaigns had improved their understanding of emotional well-being and encouraged openness regarding mental health issues. However, concerns were also raised regarding misinformation, exposure to negative content, cyberbullying, unrealistic social comparisons, and emotional pressure resulting from excessive social media engagement.

The findings also indicated that while moderate and purposeful use of social media promoted awareness and information access, excessive use was associated with negative emotional outcomes such as anxiety, distraction, reduced concentration, and feelings of inadequacy. Some students reported experiencing stress linked to online

interactions and pressure to maintain idealised digital identities.

Overall, the results demonstrate that social media plays a dual role in students' lives. On one hand, it serves as an important channel for mental health awareness, information sharing, and social support. On the other hand, uncontrolled and excessive usage may expose students to psychological risks capable of affecting their emotional well-being and academic performance.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study demonstrate that social media utilisation among university students is widespread and deeply integrated into their academic and social lives. The high level of daily engagement with platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok reflects the growing dependence of students on digital communication environments for interaction, information access, and entertainment. This suggests that social media has evolved beyond a recreational tool to become a central component of students' everyday experiences and learning environments.

The study further revealed that social media contributes significantly to mental health awareness among university students. Exposure to online mental health campaigns, peer discussions, and educational content appears to have improved students' understanding of issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional well-being. This finding implies that social media platforms now function as informal channels of health communication, capable of reducing stigma and encouraging open conversations about psychological challenges. The accessibility and interactive nature of these platforms make them particularly attractive to young adults seeking information and emotional support.

However, the findings also highlight the contradictory nature of social media use. While students acknowledged its benefits for awareness creation and peer support, they equally identified risks associated with excessive and uncontrolled use. Experiences relating to cyberbullying, social comparison, misinformation, and emotional pressure suggest that social media can negatively influence students' psychological well-being when not properly managed. This indicates that increased exposure to mental health content does not automatically translate into healthier emotional outcomes. Instead, the quality of engagement and the ability to critically evaluate online information play important roles in shaping students' experiences.

The findings further suggest that students who engage with social media for educational and informational purposes may derive greater benefits in terms of awareness and support compared to those who primarily use these platforms for passive entertainment. This reinforces the importance of digital literacy and

responsible online behaviour in maximising the positive contributions of social media while minimising associated risks.

Another important implication of the study is the growing need for universities to strengthen institutional support systems relating to digital well-being and mental health education. Since students already rely heavily on social media for information and interaction, higher institutions can strategically utilise these platforms for awareness campaigns, online counselling initiatives, and dissemination of credible mental health information. At the same time, universities should develop programmes that educate students on responsible social media use, emotional resilience, and critical evaluation of online content.

Overall, the findings reveal that social media possesses both empowering and harmful potentials in relation to mental health awareness among university students. Its impact is therefore shaped not merely by access or frequency of use, but by the nature, purpose, and quality of engagement within digital environments.

Conclusion

This study examined social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students, with particular emphasis on how patterns of social media engagement shape awareness, perception, and psychological well-being. The findings revealed that social media has become an integral part of students' academic and social lives, serving as a major platform for communication, information sharing, entertainment, and social interaction. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, X (Twitter), and TikTok were identified as the most frequently utilised, reflecting the growing digital orientation of contemporary university students.

The study further established that social media contributes positively to mental health awareness by exposing students to educational content, advocacy campaigns, peer discussions, and support networks relating to emotional well-being. Through these platforms, students demonstrated increased familiarity with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout. This indicates that social media can serve as an accessible and effective channel for mental health education and stigma reduction among young adults.

However, the findings also revealed that excessive and unregulated use of social media may negatively affect students' psychological well-being. Challenges such as cyberbullying, misinformation, social comparison, emotional pressure, and digital addiction were identified as significant concerns capable of contributing to anxiety, stress, and reduced self-esteem. This demonstrates that social media functions as both a beneficial and potentially harmful environment,

depending on the nature and quality of students' engagement.

The study therefore concludes that social media utilisation and mental health awareness among university students are closely interconnected. While social media offers opportunities for increased awareness, peer support, and access to mental health information, its misuse may expose students to emotional and psychological risks. Consequently, there is a need for balanced usage, improved digital literacy, and institutional support systems that encourage responsible online behaviour and promote psychological well-being. Universities, policymakers, and mental health professionals must therefore work collaboratively to harness the positive potential of social media while addressing its associated risks within higher education environments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, universities should develop institutional programmes that promote responsible social media utilisation and mental health awareness among students. This can be achieved through regular seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns focused on digital well-being, emotional resilience, and healthy online behaviour. University counselling centres should also strengthen their online presence by using social media platforms to disseminate credible mental health information, provide virtual support services, and encourage students to seek professional assistance when necessary.

Furthermore, university management should integrate digital literacy and mental health education into general studies and student orientation programmes. This would equip students with the skills needed to critically evaluate online information, identify misinformation, and engage responsibly with social media content. Lecturers and academic advisers should also guide students on maintaining balanced digital habits that support academic productivity and psychological well-being.

In addition, policymakers and educational stakeholders should collaborate with mental health professionals, librarians, and information experts to design evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing the negative psychological effects associated with excessive social media use. Such interventions should address issues such as cyberbullying, digital addiction, and online harassment.

Finally, students themselves should be encouraged to adopt purposeful and regulated patterns of social media use by prioritising educational and supportive engagements over excessive entertainment and unhealthy social comparison. This would enhance the positive contributions of social media while minimising its

adverse effects on mental health and academic performance.

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