

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH: A FOCUS ON DEPRESSION

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Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of social media use on the mental health of university students, focusing on depression. Using a survey design, data were collected from 180 students across Delta State University (DELSU), Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, and Ogwashi-Uku Polytechnic. The research was anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Social Comparison Theory. Findings revealed that most students spend over three hours daily on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. Excessive use was significantly associated with depressive symptoms such as loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness, while moderate use promoted communication and social support. The study concludes that frequent social media use contributes to poor mental health among students. It recommends increased awareness on digital well-being and balanced online engagement to reduce the risk of depression.*

Keywords: *social-media; mental health; depression; university students; digital well-being.*

Introduction

Social media, as online platforms and digital technologies, help users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content in virtual communities. They have helped to ease physical and temporal constraints in communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2022; Brigiht, 2023). They include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp. These platforms have transformed communication globally by enabling real-time interaction and user-generated content across social, educational, and professional domains. The Global Digital Report (2024) estimates that over 4.9 billion people use social media worldwide, with individuals aged 18–29 forming the largest proportion. In Nigeria, there are more than 34 million active social media users with WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram being the most popular among students (Statista, 2024). The use of social media has become an integral part of everyday life for young adults, particularly university students. For many students, these platforms offer spaces to build networks, share experiences, and access information. Collaborative learning, peer-to-peer interactions, access to educational resources and enhanced learning experience among university students have been facilitated by social media (Hassan, Nasreen, Shamim-ur-Rasil, Niaz & Zahid, 2024). Similarly, Olola, Asukwo & Odufuwa (2022) mentioned that social media has offered university students opportunities to express their individual worth to the world as well as personal development. Esieboma and Osaiyuwu (2024) described the social media as a double-edged sword because of its ability to foster a sense of connection and community while its excessive use leads to social comparison, and mental disability such as depression. Thus, there is a global concern on the growing prevalence of social media use and its adverse effects on students' mental health.

Students' mental health encompasses their ability to manage stress, interpersonal connections and make the right decisions when needed. It influences students' cognition, perception and behaviour (Esieboma & Osaiyuwu, 2024). On a daily basis, university students are faced with the struggles of adapting to their learning environment, academic demands, building or establishing connections with peers and instructors, and the reality of independence. A sound mental health helps them to recognise their strength through which they cope with the regular demands of their learning environment which cumulatively results in their fruitfulness or productivity in life.

However, student's mental health could be said to be jeopardised when he displays the inability to think, feel and act in ways that cannot produce the desired quality of life in terms of social relationship and academic performance. Excessive use of social media has been

identified as one of the factors that could jeopardise the mental health of a student (Esieboma & Osaiyuwu, 2024). Nyiramana (2025) observed that young adults are prone to experiencing mental health implications such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation because of the increased use of social media. Corroboratively, Carlos and Djamilo (2024) identified depression as one of the mental health implications of excessive use of social media. They assert that most of the information accessible by students on social media are idealised content that promotes social comparison which starts with anxiety and degenerates to depression. The ease of constant connectivity results in excessive use, comparison, cyberbullying, and social isolation, all of which contribute to depressive symptoms and anxiety (Al-Shaya, Almutairi & Alshammari, 2023).

In Nigeria, studies have revealed that prolonged social media exposure especially to negative or idealised content has contributed to depressive symptoms, loneliness, and distraction from academic work among university undergraduates (Ajayi & Olatunji, 2023). Many students report feelings of anxiety and low mood after engaging with posts that portray unrealistic lifestyles or social success (Igwebuike Research Institute, 2023). Findings indicate a consistent positive relationship between problematic social media use and depression (Zhang, Wang & Chen, 2025; Jing, Liu & Zhang, 2025). In particular, patterns of passive scrolling and social comparison on platforms like Instagram and TikTok tend to lower mood and self-esteem, while excessive engagement may trigger fear of missing out (FOMO) and perceived social inadequacy (Bányai, Kovac & Papay, 2023). Considering the growing local and international evidences on social media use and depression among university students, it is here presumed that most university students should by now consciously reduce the use of social media as a way to curb depression. It is based on this that the study seeks to further examine the extent to which university students still use social media; the relationship between social media use and depression; the social media platforms most associated with depressive symptoms, identify the specific social media platforms that contribute to depressive symptoms, and assess the coping mechanisms or protective factors that moderate social media use and depression.

Conceptualization and Review of Related Literature

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) defines mental health as the emotional, psychological and social well-being that influences a students' cognition, perception and behavior. It is a state of well-being in which a student realizes his ability to cope with the stress of life, and make productive contribution to self and society. Khalaf, Alubied,

Khalaf and Rifaey (2023) describe mental health as the state of well-being in which a student recognizes his potentials, successfully navigate daily challenges, and perform effectively at school. To Brighit (2023) mental health is a condition of well-being in which students comprehend their skills, solve day-to-day difficulties, work successfully, and make a substantial contribution to the lives of others. It is concerned with the ability of a student to manage stress, interpersonal connections, and decision-making.

Additionally, mental health is not merely the absence of mental disorder; it encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being of an individual (Naslund, Bondre, Torous & Aschbrenner, 2020). A mentally healthy student understands his areas of strength, weaknesses and optimally utilize them to navigate the path of life and academic success. It is not only beneficial to the individual but to the society at large. Academically, mental health positively influences a students' cognition, perception, and behavior while lifestyle factors like stress, social connections and interactions have negative impact (Esieboma & Osaiyuwu, 2024). The scholars stressed that the proliferation of social media has distorted the ability of students to recognize their strength and cope with demands of life. Among university students, mental health challenges often stem from academic stress, social pressures, and transitions to independent living. With the addition of social media, these pressures can intensify as students experience cyberbullying, social comparison, depression, and unrealistic expectations created by curated online content (Bányai et al., 2023).

Depression is a mood disorder characterized by persistent sadness, loss of interest, and low energy, often accompanied by poor concentration and feelings of hopelessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). It is one of the biggest causes of disability. One of its symptoms is 'Anhedonia' described as a state in which people no longer feel joyful from the things they usually make fun of (Brighit, 2023; Peng, et al., 2021). It is one of the most prevalent mental health conditions affecting the general population. According to Ghani, Nadzir & Noor (2022) it affects approximately 30 million people globally. Among young adults, depression can reduce motivation, impair academic performance, and increase the risk of substance abuse or suicidal thoughts.

Studies indicate that social media is one of the major contributors of depression among students due to its increased use in modern society (Ghani et al., 2022). Social media as online communication tools have been described as a two-edged that helps ease physical and temporary constraints in communication, rapidly transform social conventions,

values, cultures, and improve mental health (Bright, 2023). Its interactive abilities make it attractive and at the same time obsessive to the depressives (Peng, Yan, Yuan & Zhou, 2021). In other words, it first captures users through its anonymous nature and the fact that one could feel comfortable with a sense of freedom to share anything. Once users are captured, they could get addicted by excessive use which could lead to depression a result of unhealthy comparisons. It is believed that depression could be caused by social media addiction and social media addiction could be caused by depression.

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates a significant correlation between social media use and depressive symptoms among university students across diverse cultural contexts. The relationship appears multifaceted involving time spent online, emotional investment, exposure to negative social comparisons, and problematic patterns of use that can lead to loneliness, anxiety, and depressive mood (Bányai et al., 2023; Naslund et al., 2020). Similarly, Jing et al. (2025) conducted a meta-analysis of 26,000 university students and found a significant correlation between social media addiction and depression, indicating that individuals who engage in problematic online behaviours are more likely to experience depressive symptoms.

Additionally, studies from multiple countries including China (Zhang et al., 2025), Saudi Arabia (Al-Shaya et al., 2023), and Nigeria (Ajayi & Olatunji, 2023) confirm a rising prevalence of depressive symptoms linked to high social media usage, highlighting the global scope of the problem. Recent cross-national studies have confirmed that intensive engagement with social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) tends to increase the likelihood of depressive symptoms, especially when users engage in upward social comparison or passive consumption of others' curated content (Twenge, Haidt & Campbell, 2023; Jing et al., 2025).

In Africa, research attention has increasingly focused on social media's psychological impact on students. Eka et al. (2024) examined over 450 university students across Nigeria, Uganda, and Cameroon and found that frequent social media users reported higher depressive symptoms as a result of social comparison. However, strong family relationships and supportive peer networks appeared to buffer these effects.

In Nigeria, Ajayi and Olatunji (2023) reported that heavy users of Instagram and Snapchat exhibited significantly lower self-esteem and greater depressive tendencies compared with students who used such platforms mainly for academic or professional networking. Igwebuike Research Institute (2023) reported that students who spent more than four hours daily on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were more prone to emotional exhaustion and negative self-evaluation. They

assert that while social media enhances social connectedness, unregulated use often deepens psychological distress among undergraduates struggling with identity and peer validation. These align with Al-Shaya et al. (2023) assertion that frequent exposure to emotionally charged content activates brain regions associated with stress and sadness, thereby contributing to chronic mood dysregulation. A study at Afe Babalola University found a moderate correlation between social media addiction and mental health deterioration, highlighting social comparison and fear of missing out (FoMO) as mediating factors (Ajayi & Olatunji, 2023). Similarly, Awopetu et al. (2024) in their Systematic Review of Social Media Addiction and Mental Health of Nigerian University Students observed that excessive online engagement was associated with depression and reduced academic performance, though some positive aspects such as social connectedness were acknowledged.

Overall, existing literature confirms a consistent, positive correlation between social media use and depression among university students, although the causality remains bidirectional, that is, depression may also drive excessive social media engagement as a coping mechanism (Naslund et al., 2020). Scholars therefore recommend balanced digital habits, mindful engagement, and institutional interventions to mitigate the adverse psychological effects of social media use on university students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Social Comparison Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a holistic understanding of how excessive social media use influence students' mental well-being, particularly depression.

Social Comparison Theory

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate their worth by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). In the context of social media, this comparison occurs continuously as users are exposed to idealized portrayals of peers' achievements, beauty, and lifestyles. Recent studies confirm that upward social comparison contributes to depressive symptoms and low self-esteem (Bányai et al., 2023; Vogel et al., 2014). For example, Twenge et al. (2023) found that university students who frequently viewed others' highlight reels on Instagram reported higher levels of sadness and inadequacy. Similarly, Jing et al. (2025) established that

continuous exposure to filtered and perfected online images lead to negative affective states among youth.

In Nigeria, Olapegba and Ayandele (2023) reported that students who spend more than three hours daily on social networking sites were more likely to experience anxiety and depressive symptoms, largely due to social comparison. Thus, Social Comparison Theory provides a psychological explanation for how social media promotes emotional distress through comparative evaluation.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) focuses on the motivations behind media consumption. It suggests that individuals actively use media to satisfy psychological and social needs such as belonging, entertainment, or self-expression (Katz et al., 1973). In modern contexts, university students engage with social media for both positive gratifications such as connection and information and negative outcomes, including dependency and anxiety (Apaolaza et al., 2014; Eka et al., 2024). A 2023 study by Ajayi and Olatunji (2023) in Nigeria revealed that while students use social media to relieve academic stress, overuse often results in mental fatigue and emotional instability. Likewise, Wu et al. (2022) found that unmet needs for validation on social platforms increase vulnerability to depression and loneliness. The UGT thus explains the dual role of social media as both a coping tool and a source of psychological strain, depending on how gratifications are pursued.

Research Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. The design was chosen because it enables the researcher to collect data from a large group of respondents within a limited time and at minimal cost. Through the use of structured questionnaire, the study sought to gather the opinions and experiences of university students regarding how social media affects their mental health, particularly in relation to depression. The survey method was suitable because it allows for the quantitative analysis of variables such as social media usage, emotional well-being, and depressive tendencies. The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students from three tertiary institutions in Delta State, Nigeria: Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, and Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku. These institutions were selected because they represent a mix of university and polytechnic environments, providing a balanced representation of students with diverse social and academic experiences. The total estimated student population across these institutions was

approximately 1,500 students. Due to time and logistical limitations, 180 respondents were selected and analysed. The stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure fair representation across the three institutions and academic levels. The distribution of questionnaire was as follows: Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka – 70 respondents, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba – 60 respondents, and Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku – 50 respondents. This method ensured that every stratum (institution and level) was adequately represented, reducing bias and enhancing the validity of the findings. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was distributed physically to respondents on campus through direct contact with students in lecture halls, hostels, and recreational centres. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and informed that the study was purely for academic purposes. The researchers administered the questionnaire with the assistance of two trained research assistants. The questionnaire was designed to obtain relevant information from respondents on social media use, mental health effects, and coping strategies.

Data Presentation and Analysis

During the course of this study, 180 questionnaires were distributed, and 171 questionnaires were collected from respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Variables	Percentage
Gender	Male	82	48.0
	Female	89	52.0
Age	18–25 years	115	67.3
	26–30 years	39	22.8
	Above 30 years	17	9.9

Institution	DELSU, Abraka	67	39.2
	Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba	57	33.3
	Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku	47	27.5
Level of Study	100–200 level	54	31.6
	300–400 level	74	43.3
	HND I–II / ND II	43	25.1
Total respondents		171	100

Table 1 indicates a balanced representation of male (48%) and female (52%) respondents across the sampled institutions. Most respondents (67.3%) fall within the age range of 18–25 years, indicating a predominantly youthful population, which is typical of university students. DELSU, Abraka, recorded the highest number of participants (39.2%), followed by Dennis Osadebay University (33.3%) and Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku (27.5%). Regarding academic level, most respondents (43.3%) were in 300–400 level, reflecting a mature understanding of social media and mental health issues.

Table 2: Extent of Social Media Usage

Time Spent Daily	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	11	6.4%
1–3 hours	57	33.3%
> 3 hours	103	60.2%
Total	171	100%

Table 2 presents data of majority, (60.2%) of respondents use social media for more than three hours daily, indicating high engagement and potential exposure to negative effects linked to prolonged use.

Table 3: Indicators of Relationship with Depression

Statement	Strongly Agree (n, %)	Agree (n, %)	Disagree (n, %)	Strongly Disagree (n, %)
Excessive use makes me feel lonely/sad	72 (42.1%)	58 (33.9%)	25 (14.6%)	16 (9.4%)
I feel inferior after comparing myself online	76 (44.4%)	55 (32.2%)	24 (14.0%)	16 (9.4%)
I feel anxious when not active on social media	60 (35.1%)	58 (33.9%)	31 (18.1%)	22 (12.9%)

Table 3 indicates combined agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree) ranges from 69.0% to 76.6% across statements, showing a strong perceived link between social media behaviors and depressive/anxiety symptoms.

Table 4: Platforms Used and Association

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
TikTok	61	35.7%
Instagram	56	32.7%
WhatsApp	20	11.7%
Snapchat	17	9.9%
Facebook/X (Twitter)	17	9.9%
Total	171	100%

Table 4 indicates TikTok and Instagram (combined 68.4%) dominate usage; both are visual platforms linked in literature to upward social comparison and depressive symptoms.

Table 5: Coping Mechanisms and Protective Factors

Coping Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Talking to friends/family	72	42.1%
Limiting time on social media	48	28.1%
Focusing on academics/hobbies	36	21.1%
Seeking professional counselling	15	8.8%
Total respondents (multiple responses possible)		n/a

Table 5 indicates Social support (42.1%) is the most common coping mechanism; professional help is least used (8.8%). This suggests reliance on informal support and limited counselling uptake.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that a majority of respondents (about 71%) spend more than three hours daily on social media, particularly on TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. This high level of usage supports Twenge (2023), who reported that prolonged exposure to social networking platforms significantly correlates with poor mental well-being among young adults. Similarly, a meta-analysis published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that each additional hour spent on social media is associated with a 13% increased risk of depression among adolescents (Liu et al., 2022).

Within the Nigerian context, this pattern is consistent with Sharif and Alzahrani (2021), who observed that university students using social media for non-academic purposes frequently report emotional exhaustion and decreased concentration. This implies that while social media enhances communication, excessive use may interfere with academic focus and emotional stability. Therefore, the current findings affirm that excessive daily engagement on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram can heighten psychological stress and fatigue among students.

Secondly, the data further revealed that 69.6% of the respondents admitted to experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness, or low self-esteem linked to social media engagement. This finding aligns with Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others' online portrayals. Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles on

TikTok and Instagram promotes upward social comparison, fostering feelings of inadequacy and depression.

Empirical studies have confirmed this relationship. A large-scale survey by Bányai et al. (2017) in PLOS ONE showed that problematic social media use among students was significantly associated with higher levels of depression and low self-worth. Similarly, Shannon et al. (2022), in JMIR Mental Health, found that excessive social media engagement and emotional investment increase anxiety and depressive symptoms. Moreover, a 2022 experimental study published in Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking demonstrated that participants who took a one-week break from social media reported lower depression scores and better mood regulation.

The consistency of these findings reinforces the conclusion that excessive social media engagement directly correlates with depressive tendencies, especially when driven by comparison and emotional dependence.

Among the surveyed platforms, TikTok and Instagram were most frequently linked to depressive symptoms, followed by Snapchat, while Facebook and X (Twitter) were the least used and least associated with negative emotions. These results mirror Twenge (2023) and Haidt's (2023) analyses showing that visually oriented, validation-driven platforms where users rely heavily on likes, followers, and curated images most strongly predict depressive outcomes among youth.

Naslund et al. (2020) also emphasized that digital environments emphasizing visual comparison and idealized content amplify emotional exhaustion, fear of missing out (FOMO), and self-doubt. This finding suggests that TikTok and Instagram's focus on visual storytelling and social validation increases vulnerability to depression compared to text-based platforms like X or Facebook. Thus, the present study substantiates that visually immersive social media platforms intensify emotional distress among students through mechanisms of social comparison and approval-seeking.

Despite the adverse effects identified, some respondents acknowledged that social media also provides emotional support, peer connection, and stress relief, aligning with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973). This theory explains that users actively engage with media to satisfy social and psychological needs such as belongingness and entertainment. However, when gratifications turn compulsive or excessive, they may lead to psychological dependency and mental distress.

Research by Eka et al. (2024) and Sharif & Alzahrani (2021) further supports the finding that strong family relationships and peer support

networks can buffer the negative impact of social media on depression. In addition, a randomized controlled trial reported by JMIR Mental Health (Shannon et al., 2022) found that participants who practiced mindful usage taking intentional breaks or setting screen-time limits experienced improved mood and reduced depressive symptoms. These findings highlight that although social media can be beneficial for connection and information exchange, balanced digital behavior and offline social support are essential protective factors for maintaining mental health. In summary, the findings confirm that high-intensity social media use, especially on visual platforms like TikTok and Instagram, correlates with increased depressive symptoms among university students. This relationship is reinforced by global research showing similar trends. Nevertheless, moderate use and supportive offline relationships can serve as effective buffers against social media induced mental

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of social media use on the mental health of university students, focusing particularly on depression. The findings revealed that most students spend a significant portion of their daily time, often more than three hours, on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Such prolonged use was found to be associated with emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, especially when students engaged in passive content consumption and social comparison. The study established that excessive social media use has a measurable negative effect on students' emotional well-being, confirming the relevance of Social Comparison Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory in explaining the relationship between media behavior and mental health. Specifically, platforms emphasizing visual content and validation metrics (likes, followers, and comments) such as TikTok and Instagram were found to trigger upward social comparison and "fear of missing out" (FOMO), leading to depressive tendencies.

However, the study also acknowledged that social media is not inherently harmful. When used moderately, these platforms offer psychological and social benefits such as communication, entertainment, academic networking, and stress relief. Therefore, the findings suggest that the impact of social media depends largely on usage patterns, self-regulation, and emotional resilience of the users. In conclusion, while social media remains an essential part of student life, conscious and balanced use is critical to prevent mental health decline among young adults.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that students should limit daily time spent on social media and adopt mindful use strategies, such as digital detoxes or scheduled online breaks, to maintain healthy mental balance. Tertiary institutions should incorporate mental health education and digital well-being workshops into students' orientation and counselling services. This would help students recognize early signs of depression related to excessive social media use. Families and friends should foster open communication and provide emotional support systems that reduce overreliance on social media for validation or companionship. School authorities and policymakers should develop guidelines that encourage responsible social media engagement, especially during academic hours, and promote the use of these platforms for educational and creative purposes.

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