

The Extent of Social Media Usage in Relation to Psychological Well-Being of Undergraduate Students at the University of Nairobi

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Abstract

This study assessed the extent of social media usage among undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi. The study's primary goal was based on the Theory of Displaced Behaviour and Festinger's Social Comparison Theory. To begin, the study aimed to determine how widely social media is used among undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi. The target population included 13,869 students from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Using a survey approach and applying the Cochran formula, a sample of 136 students was selected. Data were collected through questionnaires and interview guides, utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods for analysis. The findings showed different patterns of social media usage among students, with some engaging sporadically while others displayed indications of excessive use. The study also revealed that social media use is high among undergraduate students, whose access was aided by very high internet access and the availability of smartphones for use by the students. The study concludes that there is a connection between social media use and the problem of psychological well-being, especially due to social media and smartphone addictions.

Key terms: Digital consumption, psychological well-being, social media usage, university students.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become an important component of university students' daily lives. It has revolutionised how young people communicate, access information, and participate in academic and social spaces. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok have evolved beyond mere entertainment tools; they now serve as important spaces for learning, identity expression, networking, and advocacy. Among students, the boundaries between online and offline life have become increasingly blurred, as social media is integrated into their academic routines, relationships, and even mental health experiences.

Research shows that university students around the world increasingly rely on social media for many reasons. Students leverage technology for joint learning, sharing information, staying connected with classmates, and accessing news content (Gentilviso, 2019). The rise of smartphones and accessible internet has hastened this trend, with a majority of students indicating that they interact with various platforms on a daily basis. However, the same technologies that provide these benefits can also present challenges. There have been increasing concerns about excessive use, digital dependency, and the negative effects on attention span, sleep patterns, and academic performance. More broadly, questions are emerging about the psychological implications of constant connectivity and the pressure to maintain curated online personas.

At the University of Nairobi, social media usage is notably widespread. Students frequently engage with these platforms not only for social interaction but also for academic and professional purposes. Given Nairobi's vibrant technology ecosystem and its status as a regional digital hub, it is unsurprising that university students are active digital participants. Nonetheless, despite this high level of engagement, there is limited empirical research examining the extent, nature, and impact of social media usage among students at the University of Nairobi. The bulk of existing literature either focuses on Western contexts or examines surface-level usage patterns without delving into the lived experiences and implications for student well-being and academic life in the Kenyan context.

The problem is that although social media is widely used among university students in Kenya, there is insufficient empirical data on the actual extent, frequency, and patterns of usage, particularly at the University of Nairobi. This gap in understanding makes it hard for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to assess the real impact of digital engagement on academic performance, psychological well-being, and social development.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the extent of social media usage among students at the University of Nairobi. Specifically, it aims to assess how frequently students engage with different social media platforms, identify the main purposes for which they use these platforms, whether for academic, social, or recreational reasons and examine how such engagement influences their educational and social experiences.

While social media can foster meaningful digital collaboration and access to information, it can also cause distraction, procrastination, and a rise in mental fatigue. The University of Nairobi, being one of the leading institutions in the region, offers a suitable case study for understanding these dynamics. Its diverse student population and urban location allow for an analysis that takes into account both the benefits and the drawbacks of digital engagement. Furthermore, as institutions of higher learning increasingly adopt blended learning models and digital platforms for administration and communication, understanding the patterns and effects of student-led social media usage becomes ever more crucial.

Previous research has pointed out some of the consequences of excessive social media use. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) note that most of the time, students get a strong urge to regularly check for notifications, spend extended periods on platforms, and sometimes neglect real-life obligations. Such behaviour may have significant implications for mental health, particularly around anxiety, self-esteem, and time management. However, these findings require validation in a Kenyan context, where socio-cultural and technological factors may produce unique patterns of digital behaviour. Moreover, while the digital divide continues to affect access in some regions, urban institutions like the University of Nairobi present a

near-constant exposure to social media, making it vital to assess not just the volume of use but also its qualitative impact.

This research is important as it adds to the existing literature on digital engagement in higher education and offers insights specific to the context that can guide future institutional policies and student support services. As universities navigate the post-pandemic landscape and integrate more digital tools into learning, understanding student behaviour online becomes essential. The findings from this research will assist educators, administrators, and mental health practitioners in creating strategies to support more balanced and productive social media habits among students.

In sum, the intersection between social media usage and student life is complex and multifaceted. While social media platforms give valuable opportunities for engagement and learning, they also present challenges that must be acknowledged and managed. This study, through its focus on the University of Nairobi, contributes to a deeper understanding of how social media is shaping student experiences in Kenyan universities and offers a foundation for further exploration into digital culture in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become an indispensable tool in contemporary society, particularly among university students who use it for a variety of reasons ranging from academic support to social interaction and self-expression. The evolution of social networking platforms has changed the communication landscape, allowing students to share content, engage in collaborative learning, and participate in global conversations. Social media, in this context, refers to web-based platforms built on the principles of Web 2.0, which emphasise user participation, content sharing, and social interaction. These platforms have integrated themselves into students' daily lives, affecting how they manage academic responsibilities, sustain friendships, and form their identities in digital spaces.

Various types of social media platforms are used by students, each serving different roles. Social sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn are primarily used for

connecting with others and establishing networks. Media-sharing platforms such as Instagram and YouTube facilitate visual expression and content consumption, while microblogging sites like Twitter enable quick communication and news updates. In the present study, the focus is on three specific platforms: Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. These platforms were chosen because of their widespread popularity among university students and their capacity to influence both academic behaviours and social engagement.

Facebook, originally developed for college students, has evolved into a global platform for expression, discussion, and community building. According to Kallas (2017), the platform had a remarkable growth, rising from 24 million users in 2007 to nearly two billion monthly active users by 2017. It remains a central hub for digital interactions, supporting both personal and academic conversations. YouTube has similarly become a key tool for learning, with students accessing a wide range of academic content, including tutorials, lectures, and explainer videos. Instagram, through its visually driven format, allows users to curate personal narratives, explore creative trends, and stay connected through images and short videos.

Scholarly research has consistently demonstrated that social media plays a central role in the academic and social experiences of university students. Ellison et al. (2007) observed that students use social media to maintain existing relationships while also forming new ones, especially during transitional periods such as moving from high school to university. These platforms often act as informal support systems that reduce feelings of isolation. Furthermore, social media enhances academic collaboration. Students use these platforms to organise study groups, share academic materials, and exchange ideas related to coursework and research projects.

In educational settings, social media is increasingly integrated into formal teaching and learning processes. Educators utilise it to encourage student participation, provide timely feedback, and monitor group activities. Greenhow et al. (2022) highlight the growing trend of leveraging social media tools for academic engagement, noting their usefulness in supporting peer learning, communication, and

feedback sharing. The ability to post updates, comment on shared content, and connect with others in real time fosters an interactive learning environment that extends beyond the classroom.

Despite its benefits, social media use is also associated with certain challenges. Prolonged engagement can lead to digital fatigue, procrastination, and dependency. The desire for constant online validation through likes, comments, and shares may also contribute to reduced self-esteem and mental health concerns. Sharma and Behl (2022) point out that while social media platforms promote creativity and engagement, they may also encourage comparison and passive consumption, which can detract from meaningful academic activity and real-world interactions.

The concept of social media as a double-edged sword is further explored through theoretical frameworks such as the Displaced Behaviour Theory. This theory suggests that when individuals experience stress or low motivation, they may substitute important tasks with less demanding activities, such as passive scrolling through social media. According to Miller's formulation of the theory, such behaviour serves as a coping mechanism that displaces more productive or necessary behaviours. Among university students, this may manifest in the neglect of academic work or a reduction in physical social interactions in favour of time spent online. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) note that such patterns can lead to negative implications on academic performance, time management, and personal relationships.

Moreover, the psychological impact of social media cannot be overlooked. While platforms provide access to support networks and mental health resources, they also expose users to curated content that may perpetuate unrealistic standards of success and lifestyle. The continuous exposure to idealised representations can cause feelings of inadequacy or worry, particularly among youths who are still forming their identities. The experience of social media is thus complex and deeply personal, shaped by both platform design and individual use patterns.

Although global research has provided valuable insights into the effects of social media on student life,

there is limited literature specifically addressing the Kenyan context. Most of the existing studies are based on Western or Asian populations and may not reflect the socioeconomic, infrastructural, or cultural conditions experienced by students in Kenya. In Nairobi, where access to digital technology is relatively advanced compared to other regions, students are active users of social media. However, comprehensive studies examining the frequency, purpose, and implications of this usage remain scarce. There is a particular need for localised research that not only describes user behaviour but also investigates its academic and psychological consequences.

Furthermore, few studies apply behavioural theories such as the Displaced Behaviour Theory in analysing social media usage among African university students. Such a theoretical approach could help explain observed behaviours and provide a more structured understanding of the trade-offs that students face between digital engagement and academic priorities. The lack of empirical data on these interactions represents a critical gap that this study aims to address.

This literature review has highlighted the multifaceted nature of social media use among university students. It has examined the role of popular platforms, discussed their academic and social implications, and introduced theoretical frameworks to contextualise student behaviour. It is evident that while social media provides numerous benefits, its excessive or unregulated use may have unintended consequences. There is therefore a pressing need for context-specific studies that examine not only how much time students spend on social media, but also how they use it, for what purposes, and with what perceived effects on their academic performance and personal well-being.

This study contributes to the discourse by focusing on students at the University of Nairobi, aiming to offer insights grounded in evidence that can guide policy decisions, educational strategies, and digital literacy initiatives. In doing so, it addresses an existing gap in the literature while promoting a more nuanced understanding of social media's role in higher education settings in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a descriptive research design, which allowed for the systematic identification and analysis of the variables under investigation. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This method enabled a more detailed investigation of social media usage among university students, capturing both statistical patterns and the lived experiences of the participants.

The study was conducted among students at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, located at the University of Nairobi's main campus. According to the Registrar's Office of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the faculty had a target population of 13,869 students at the time of the study. To determine a representative sample size, Cochran's formula was used. This calculation took into account a 95 per cent confidence level, a margin of error of five per cent, and an estimated population proportion of ten per cent. The result of this computation yielded an initial sample size of 138 students. However, to accommodate the finite nature of the population, Cochran's correction formula was applied, resulting in a final adjusted sample size of 136 students.

To ensure that every individual in the target population was given an equal opportunity for selection, the study utilised a simple random sampling method. The researcher, with the help of a trained research assistant, approached students randomly on the main campus of the University of Nairobi and invited them to participate in the study. Participation was completely voluntary, and only individuals who gave informed consent were part of the final sample.

Data collection relied on two main tools: structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. The questionnaires were designed to capture quantitative data, particularly on students' patterns of social media use, while the focus group discussions provided qualitative insights into student attitudes, motivations, and challenges related to social media engagement. Two focus group discussions were held, each comprising ten participants drawn from the study sample. The questionnaires were distributed in both physical form and electronically via platforms such as

Google Forms to accommodate diverse student preferences and increase response rates.

Before the actual data collection process, a pilot test was conducted at the Technical University of Kenya to evaluate the clarity, consistency, and reliability of the data collection instruments. This preliminary phase was instrumental in identifying vague items and refining the research tools. The study also employed several techniques to enhance the credibility and validity of the data. Member checking was undertaken to ensure that participants confirmed the accuracy of their responses and the interpretation of qualitative data. Peer debriefing was carried out by sharing the instruments with academic supervisors and experts in communication studies, who provided feedback that informed revisions. Additionally, the study employed saturation techniques in qualitative data collection to ensure that no significant themes were overlooked. The questionnaire was also continuously evaluated and revised based on emerging feedback during the data collection process.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participants were fully informed of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all responses, and the data gathered was used exclusively for academic purposes. The researcher took deliberate steps to minimise potential risks and ensure a safe and respectful research environment.

To assess patterns of social media usage, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they engaged with five popular platforms: Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from "Never" to "Always," allowing for a structured analysis of usage frequency and intensity. In addition to examining general usage, the study explored students' awareness of the academic applications of social media. The findings revealed that all participants owned smartphones and had active social media accounts. This confirmed the relevance of social media in their daily communication, information-seeking behaviours, and academic collaboration.

The chosen research design, data collection methods, and analytical approaches were aligned with the study's objectives, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of social media use among students in a university setting. The integration of both numerical data and personal narratives contributed to a richer understanding of how social media influences academic and social experiences at the University of Nairobi.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that university students demonstrate a high level of awareness and engagement with social media platforms, although usage levels vary across platforms. Facebook emerged as the most frequently used platform, followed closely by WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and

TikTok. The majority of students accessed these platforms daily, with WhatsApp being the most frequently used for communication purposes.

According to the survey data, both Facebook and WhatsApp reported the highest frequency of use, with 42.1 per cent of respondents indicating regular engagement. TikTok, although used by a smaller percentage of students (27.2%), recorded the highest mean usage score ($M = 4.50$), suggesting that those who use the platform tend to do so intensively. WhatsApp followed with a mean score of 3.98 ($SD = 1.076$), further establishing its centrality in students' digital routines.

The detailed usage patterns for each platform are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Social Media Usage Patterns among University Students

Platform	% Frequent Users	Mean Usage Score	Standard Deviation (SD)	Primary Purpose(s) of Use
Facebook	42.1%	3.84	–	Socialising (43.8%), Information (56.5%)
WhatsApp	42.1%	3.98	1.076	Communication (60.3%), Information (56.5%)
Twitter	36.4%	3.57	–	Information Seeking (85.1%)
YouTube	33.7%	3.40	–	Educational content (86.8%), Socialisation
Instagram	29.6%	3.10	–	Entertainment, Business
TikTok	27.2%	4.50	–	Entertainment, Business

Further analysis of the data indicates that students use different platforms for varying purposes. Facebook is predominantly used for social interactions, while WhatsApp facilitates communication and information sharing. Twitter serves mainly as a source of timely Information and news updates. YouTube is a key platform for both educational content and social engagement. Meanwhile, Instagram and TikTok are primarily used for entertainment, with a notable

number of students also engaging in business-related activities on these platforms.

Overall, social media usage among students extends beyond socialising to include academic and entrepreneurial interests. As shown in Table 2, the most commonly cited reasons for using social media were accessing Information (56.5%), entertainment (53.6%), and business purposes (28.3%).

Table 2: General Purposes of Social Media Use

Purpose of Use	% of Students Reporting Use
Information	56.5%
Entertainment	53.6%
Business	28.3%

These findings align with previous studies, underscoring the multifunctional role of social media in university students' daily lives. Social media not only facilitates communication and learning but also serves as a tool for self-expression, networking, and income generation. The results point to an integrated digital culture where social, academic, and entrepreneurial pursuits converge within the virtual space.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal distinct patterns in social media usage among students at the University of Nairobi, affirming both the ubiquity of digital platforms and their multifunctionality in students' daily lives. All participants demonstrated a high level of awareness and active engagement with various social media platforms, though the frequency and purpose of engagement varied across different applications. Notably, Facebook and WhatsApp emerged as the most frequently used platforms, closely followed by YouTube and Twitter. Interestingly, TikTok, despite a lower reported usage frequency, recorded the highest mean usage score, suggesting its increasing appeal, particularly among younger users who are drawn to its entertainment-driven, short-form video content. This shift aligns with broader global trends indicating a migration towards visually dynamic and algorithm-driven platforms that prioritise quick, immersive engagement (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

The significant engagement with WhatsApp highlights its pivotal role as a communication tool, not only for social interactions but also for academic coordination and group discussions. Twitter's high usage for information-seeking reinforces its established identity as a platform for real-time news and public discourse (Kümpel et al., 2015). Meanwhile, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are increasingly used for entertainment and entrepreneurial ventures, with students leveraging them for content creation, brand promotion, and income generation. These findings resonate with prior research that emphasises the rise

of social media as a site for youth innovation, self-expression, and digital entrepreneurship (Nwachukwu et al., 2020).

Importantly, the study demonstrates that students do not engage with social media solely for leisure. Rather, their usage reflects a complex integration of academic, social, and personal motivations. WhatsApp, for instance, is used extensively for communication and education, indicating that students value platforms that facilitate peer learning and information exchange. Similarly, YouTube's dual function as an entertainment and educational resource illustrates how students curate their digital environments to balance cognitive demands with relaxation and recreation. This multifunctionality underscores the evolving adaptability of social media platforms in responding to users' diverse needs, as also noted by Junco (2012) in his exploration of social media and student engagement.

While the potential for distraction, procrastination, and mental fatigue is acknowledged, these risks do not negate the significant educational and collaborative benefits that social media offers. Instead, the findings suggest the need for a more balanced and intentional approach to digital engagement. Universities and educators must move beyond simplistic narratives that frame social media purely as a threat to academic performance and instead consider how these tools can be integrated into pedagogy and student support systems. Previous studies have suggested that guided and structured use of digital platforms can enhance student motivation, access to resources, and collaborative learning opportunities (Tess, 2013).

In conclusion, this study affirms that social media is deeply embedded in the academic and social routines of university students. Its wide-ranging uses, from communication and education to business and entertainment, highlight its potential as both a

challenge and a resource. As such, the study calls for educational stakeholders to promote digital literacy, develop institutional guidelines for healthy media use, and explore innovative ways of incorporating social media into learning environments. Future research could further examine how personalised engagement strategies and institutional interventions can mitigate the risks of digital fatigue while enhancing the academic and emotional well-being of students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study established that university students at the University of Nairobi are not only highly aware of social media platforms but also engage with them actively and frequently for diverse purposes. Quantitative data revealed that WhatsApp and Facebook recorded the highest levels of frequent use, each at 42.1%, while TikTok, despite lower usage frequency, achieved the highest mean usage score ($M = 4.50$), indicating a notable rise in engagement among students. WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for communication (60.3%), whereas Twitter served predominantly as an information source (85.1%), and YouTube was leveraged significantly for both educational (86.8%) and socialising (86.8%) purposes.

The findings affirm that social media has evolved into a multifaceted tool that supports not only social interactions and entertainment but also academic engagement and entrepreneurial activities. This aligns with prior research on the integrative role of digital platforms in shaping modern student experiences. Given the widespread and purposeful use of these platforms, the study underscores the need to promote responsible digital citizenship and targeted media literacy initiatives that empower students to navigate the social media landscape effectively.

Recommendations: Given the increasing influence of digital technologies in higher education, future research should investigate the long-term implications of sustained social media use on students' academic outcomes, cognitive development, and mental well-being. Moreover, further exploration is warranted to determine how these platforms can be harnessed pedagogically to foster collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and professional preparedness among university learners, particularly in diverse learning environments. This would provide insights into optimising digital platforms for enhanced educational experiences and outcomes.

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