Social Media Use, Motivation and Mental Health Awareness: An Analysis of Nigerian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Background: This study investigated the relationship between Social Media Use (SMU), Social Media Motivation (SMM), and Mental Health Awareness (MHA) among Nigerian undergraduate students. **Objective:** Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research aimed to determine the individual and combined predictive roles of SMU and SMM on students' awareness of mental health issues, while also examining gender differences in MHA. **Method**: A total of 294 participants were selected through multistage sampling from two federal universities in southwestern Nigeria. Standardized questionnaires were used to collect data, which were analyzed using Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and independent t-tests. **Results**: Findings revealed no significant relationship between SMU and MHA, while SMM showed a positive, significant correlation with MHA. SMU and SMM jointly predicted MHA, explaining 15% of the variance. Male students demonstrated significantly higher mental health awareness than females. **Conclusion**: These findings highlight the importance of motivational and gender-related factors in designing effective mental health awareness interventions. Future research should explore platform-specific and culturally informed longitudinal studies to enhance the generalizability and applicability of results.

Keywords: Gender differences; mental health awareness; Nigerian undergraduates; social media motivation; social media use

Abstrak

Latar Belakang: Penelitian ini menyelidiki hubungan antara Penggunaan Media Sosial (SMU), Motivasi Media Sosial (SMM), dan Kesadaran Kesehatan Mental (MHA) di kalangan mahasiswa Nigeria. **Tujuan:** Didasarkan Teori Penggunaan dan Kepuasan, penelitian bertujuan untuk menentukan peran prediktif individu dan gabungan dari SMU dan SMM terhadap kesadaran mahasiswa akan masalah kesehatan mental, sementara juga memeriksa perbedaan gender dalam MHA. **Metode:** Sebanyak 294 partisipan dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel bertingkat dari dua universitas federal di barat daya Nigeria. Kuesioner terstandarisasi digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data, yang kemudian dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Pearson, regresi berganda, dan uji-t independen. **Hasil:** Temuan menunjukkan tidak ada hubungan signifikan antara SMU dan MHA, sementara SMM menunjukkan korelasi positif dan signifikan dengan MHA. SMU dan SMM bersama-sama memprediksi MHA, menjelaskan 15% dari varians. Siswa laki-laki menunjukkan kesadaran akan kesehatan mental lebih tinggi secara signifikan daripada perempuan. **Kesimpulan:** Temuan menyoroti pentingnya faktor motivasi dan faktor yang berhubungan dengan gender dalam merancang intervensi kesadaran kesehatan mental yang efektif. Penelitian di masa depan harus mengeksplorasi studi longitudinal yang spesifik pada platform dan berdasarkan budaya untuk meningkatkan generalisasi dan penerapan hasil.

Keywords: Kesadaran kesehatan mental; motivasi media sosial; mahasiswa Nigeria; penggunaan media sosial; perbedaan gender

Introduction

Mental health disorders (MHDs) are a growing global concern, affecting one in four individuals annually (World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). The WHO defines health not merely as the absence of disease or infirmity but as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO, 2014). This holistic view underscores the importance of mental health across all stages of life, from childhood to adulthood. Despite the increasing prevalence of MHDs, mental health awareness (MHA) remains insufficient, contributing to delayed help-seeking and inadequate support systems (Jorm et al., 2010; Patel et al., 2018).

Mental health awareness involves the ability to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness and knowledge of appropriate interventions. Low levels of MHA, combined with stigma, have led to underdiagnosis and limited treatment uptake globally, including in Nigeria (Reinert et al., 2022; Fadele et al., 2024). Young adults, particularly university students, are especially vulnerable to mental health issues due to academic pressures, identity formation, and exposure to conflicting societal expectations (API & EpiAFRIC, 2019; Aluh et al., 2019).

In Nigeria, the mental health landscape is further complicated by a lack of infrastructure, emigration of healthcare professionals, and limited access to psychiatric care (Abang, 2019). The result is a generation of young people grappling with mental health issues in a system that is ill equipped to support them. Therefore, promoting mental health literacy and awareness among youth has become a critical public health objective (Salerno, 2016; Thornicroft et al., 2022).

Social media is one of the most powerful tools available to today's youth. Social media use (SMU) encompasses digital interactions on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, which are often used for networking, entertainment, self-expression, and information seeking (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Motivations for SMU can shape not only how young people engage with content but also how they perceive and respond to mental health messages (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). While social media has the potential to raise awareness and foster supportive communities, it also poses risks, such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and harmful comparisons, which may hinder MHA (Bobkowski et al., 2016; Twenge et al., 2018).

Despite the prominence of social media in the lives of Nigerian undergraduates, little is known about how SMU influences their mental health awareness and motivation. This study aimed to examine the relationship between social media use and mental health awareness among university students in southwestern Nigeria. Specifically, it explores how different patterns and motivations for SMU contribute to or hinder awareness, with the goal of informing effective interventions that reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behaviors among young adults.

Literature Review

Social media use (SMU) has emerged as a powerful force shaping the mental health (MH) experiences of young people in recent years. Research increasingly shows that digital platforms influence not only emotional well-being but also the ways individuals seek help and understand mental health information (Ajewumi et al., 2024; *Bucci, Schwannauer, & Berry, 2019; Seabrook, Kern, & Rickard, 2016*). However, the direction and strength of these influences remain complex and occasionally contradictory.

Negative Impacts of Excessive Social Media Use

Multiple studies have associated high levels of social media engagement with poor mental health outcomes, such as increased depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, sleep disturbances, and reduced self-esteem (Du et al., 2024; Begum, 2020; Varghese, 2019; Kim et al., 2016). These effects are particularly concerning among adolescents and university students, who represent some of the heaviest social media users. In Nigeria, research by Awopetu (2024) and Onwuka and Adelabu (2023) points to rising Internet dependency among youth, which may contribute to emotional distress and distraction from academic and social responsibilities.

Positive Mental Health Awareness Through Social Media

Despite these risks, social media also presents unique opportunities to enhance mental health awareness (MHA) and support help-seeking behavior. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow the dissemination of motivational content and mental health education campaigns that reach large audiences (Saha et al., 2019; Naslund et al., 2019; Latha et al., 2020). O'Reilly et al. (2019) found that adolescents use social media not only to learn about mental health but also to support their peers, often through anonymous disclosures that reduce stigma and increase empathy. In a Nigerian study, Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) observed that students actively used social platforms to share emotions, validate experiences, and access informal psychological support.

Social Media as a Tool for Help-Seeking and Connection

The interactive nature of social media encourages user-generated content, emotional expression, and the formation of supportive networks (Pretorius et al., 2022; Vaingankar et al., 2022). Gere et al. (2019) noted that anonymity features promote openness, especially in contexts where mental illness is heavily stigmatized. This has implications for Nigerian youth, who often face cultural barriers in seeking professional mental health services (Abang, 2019). Importantly, students who are aware of mental health issues and perceive them as valid are more likely to seek support, either online or offline (Lee et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Blumler and Katz (1974) to understand how Nigerian university undergraduates use social media to meet their mental health awareness (MHA) needs. Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals actively select media based on specific psychological and social needs, namely, cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative gratifications.

In the context of MHA, students may use social media to satisfy their cognitive needs by seeking information on mental health symptoms, treatment options, and support services. Affective needs are met through emotional expression and validation by peers or support groups. Students may fulfill their social integrative needs by building online communities around shared mental health experiences, while personal integrative needs are served through self-expression and identity development, which can help reduce mental health stigma.

Overall, the existing literature points to both the risks and benefits of social media use for mental health outcomes. However, there is a lack of synthesis on how different motivations for SMU influence mental health awareness, particularly in Africa. Therefore, the uses and Gratifications Theory provides a useful lens to explain the motivations behind students' social media behavior and how these motivations relate to their level of mental health awareness. By linking gratification types to specific outcomes (e.g., help-seeking, stigma reduction, knowledge acquisition), this framework supports the study's exploration of how social media use and motivational tendencies shape mental health understanding among Nigerian undergraduates, which few studies have explicitly examined to promote MHA in ways that are culturally relevant and effective for Nigerian undergraduates. While previous studies have applied UGT in Western or Asian contexts, its application in Nigeria remains limited. This gap underscores the need to explore how gratification-seeking behaviors among Nigerian students relate to their levels of mental health awareness. This study aims to address these gaps.

Hypotheses

This review led to the development of the following research hypotheses for investigation:

H1: Undergraduate students will show a significant positive relationship between their use of social media and their understanding of mental health issues.

H2: Social media motivation will serve as a strong indicator that can significantly predict the mental health awareness levels of undergraduate students.

H3: The combination of social media use and motivation will significantly predict substantial effects on mental health awareness among undergraduate students.

H4: Statistically notable variations exist between the mental health awareness levels of male and female undergraduate students.

Method

This study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between social media use (SMU) and mental health awareness (MHA) among undergraduate students in Nigeria's southwestern region. Participants were drawn from two federal universities: Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) and University of Ibadan (UI).

A multistage sampling technique was adopted. First, two southwestern states were randomly selected using a ballot draw. Next, purposive sampling was used to select two federal universities from these states to ensure institutional representation. Finally, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants from each university based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although convenience sampling may introduce selection bias, it was deemed necessary because of logistical and ethical considerations, including students' availability and consent.

Sample or Population

A total of 294 undergraduate students participated in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 30 years (M = 23.01, SD = 2.73). The sample included 53.4% men and 46.6% women. Although no formal power analysis was conducted, the sample size was considered adequate based on similar studies in the field and the study's aim of exploring moderate effect sizes using basic inferential statistics (e.g., correlation and regression).

Data Measurement

Data were collected on the campuses of Obafemi Awolowo University and the University of Ibadan, following scheduled lecture sessions to ensure optimal student availability. Prior to administering the questionnaires, the research team engaged the participants in a brief rapport-building session to foster comfort and openness toward the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were also notified of their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study.

The questionnaire was administered in person using printed questionnaires. The research team members conducted brief personal interactions with each participant to clarify any questions or uncertainties regarding the instrument. This face-to-face method facilitated real-time explanations, enhancing the accuracy and completeness of the responses.

The research instrument consisted of four sections designed to gather relevant data. The collected demographic information included participants' age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic background, religious affiliation, and current year of study.

Social media use (SMU) was measured using the *Social Media Use Questionnaire* (SMUQ) developed by Xanidis and Brignell (2016). This 9-item scale assesses the frequency and compulsivity of social media engagement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Sample items include: "I lose track of time when using social networking sites," and "I struggle to stay in places where I won't be able to access social networking sites." The scores were aggregated into a single index, with higher scores indicating more intense social media use. The original SMUQ demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .87).

Social Media Motivation was assessed using the 16-item scale by Al-Menayes (2015). This instrument captures four dimensions of motivation for social media use—entertainment (5 items, α = .87), personal utility (4 items, α = .81), information-seeking (4 items, α = .81), and convenience (3 items, α = .74) rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Example items include: "I use social media when I have nothing else to do because it entertains me," and "I use social media to search for information."

Measured Mental Health Awareness (MHA) using the 12-item *Mental Health Knowledge and Awareness Scale* developed by Siddique et al. (2022). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), yielding total scores ranging from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater awareness and understanding of mental health. Representative items include: "If I recognized that I have a mental disorder, I would seek help from my family or go to a psychiatrist," and "If a friend developed a mental disorder, I would talk to their parents or teachers and encourage them to seek psychological help." The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency (α = .85).

All instruments used were previously validated and showed good psychometric properties, supporting their reliability and appropriateness for assessing social media use, motivation and mental health literacy among university students.

Data Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyze the collected data. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the participants'socio-demographic characteristics and present general trends in the dataset. Inferential statistics were used to test the study hypotheses. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to assess the relationships between social media use, social media motivation, and mental health awareness, addressing the first and second research questions. To examine the predictive power of Social Media Use and Motivation on Mental Health Awareness, Multiple Regression Analysis was conducted. An independent samples t-test was used to assess gender differences in Mental Health Awareness, addressing the fourth hypothesis. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was adopted throughout the analysis to determine statistically significant relationships and differences. The reliability of the study instruments was established using Cronbach's alpha, with an overall reliability coefficient of α = 0.85, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Result

This section presents the findings from the statistical analyses conducted to test the four hypotheses of this study.

Hypothesis One: Relationship between Social Media Use and Mental Health Awareness

To determine the relationship between Social Media Use and Mental Health Awareness, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Between Social Media Use and Mental Health Awareness

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2
1. Social Media Use	54.13	14.95	-	
2. Mental Health Awareness	51.79	5.14	-.08	-

The research findings showed that there was no relationship between undergraduate students' social media use and their mental health awareness (r = -.08, p > .05). Thus, Hypothesis One was rejected.

Hypothesis Two: Relationship between Social Media Motivation and Mental Health Awareness

To determine the relationship between Social Media Motivation and Mental Health Awareness, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Showing the Association Between Social Media Motivation and Mental Health Awareness

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2
1.Social Media Motivation	76.48	11.74	-	
2. Mental Health Awareness	51.79	5.14	.36**	-

The analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between students' social media motivation and mental health awareness (r = .36, $p < .01$). Consequently, Hypothesis Two was supported.

Hypothesis Three: Predictive Role of Social Media Use and Motivation on Mental Health Awareness

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the joint and independent predictive capacities of social media use and motivation on mental health awareness.

Table 3. Summary of Multiple Regression Table Showing Predictive Role of Social Media Use and Social Media Motivation on Mental Health Awareness

Variables	β	T	P	R	R²	F	P
Social Media Use	-.13	-2.29	<.05				
Social Media Motivation	.38	6.60	<.05	.39	.15	22.49	<.05

Model Summary: R = .39, R² = .15, F(2, 259) = 22.49, $p < .05$

The model was statistically significant, indicating that SMU and SMM jointly predicted mental health awareness among the students. Together, they accounted for 15% of the variance in mental-health awareness. Specifically, social media motivation emerged as a stronger predictor (β = .38, $p < .05$) than social media use (β = −.13, $p < .05$). Therefore, Hypothesis Three was supported.

Hypothesis Four: Gender Differences in Mental Health Awareness

An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether male and female students differed significantly in their levels of mental health awareness.

Table 4. Summary of Independent Sample T-test of Male and Female on Mental Health Awareness

DV	Gender	N	Mean	Std	t	p
Mental Health Awareness	Male	157	53.4	5.42	1.98	<.05
	Female	137	46.6	4.74		

Note: Hypothesis Four was supported. Male students demonstrated better mental health awareness than did female students.

The results revealed a statistically significant difference between male and female students in mental health awareness (t (260) = 1.98, $p < .05$), with male students scoring higher (M = 53.40, SD = 5.42) than their female counterparts (M = 51.13, SD = 4.74). Thus, Hypothesis Four was supported.

Discussion

This study explored the relationships between social media use (SMU), social media motivation (SMM), and mental health awareness (MHA) among undergraduate students in Nigeria's southwestern region. The findings reveal nuanced dynamics across these variables.

The analysis indicated no significant relationship between students' general social media usage patterns and their mental health awareness levels. This suggests that frequent or intense engagement with social media platforms does not necessarily translate to increased understanding or literacy regarding mental health issues. This finding aligns with prior studies (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Best et al., 2014), which emphasize the complex and sometimes contradictory influences of social media on mental health outcomes.

However, students' motivations for using social media, such as seeking information, entertainment, personal utility, and convenience, were significantly and positively related to their mental health awareness. This supports earlier research by Vaingankar et al. (2022) and Gere et al. (2019), who emphasized that the targeted, purposeful use of social media (particularly for mental health education or support) plays a more meaningful role in shaping awareness and literacy than mere usage frequency.

Furthermore, the regression analysis confirmed that SMU and SMM jointly accounted for approximately 15% of the variance in mental health awareness among students. Although modest, this effect highlights the potential for motivational drivers to moderate the relationship between media engagement and cognitive or attitudinal outcomes. Thus, understanding the impact of social media on mental health should consider not only usage frequency but also the underlying motivations and content engagement. In addition, external factors such as formal education about mental health, personal experiences with psychological disorders, peer influence, family background, and access to campus counseling services should be considered.

Interestingly, gender-based differences emerged in awareness levels, with male students demonstrating higher mental health awareness than their female counterparts. This finding contradicts the results of Shivani and Judge (2022) and Wong (2016), who reported higher health literacy among women. However, this aligns with Chandra et al. (2018) and Fischer and Farina (1995), who suggest that in some cultural contexts, men may access more external informational resources or be more exposed to certain types of public discourse.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of motivational orientation toward social media use, rather than the volume of use alone, in promoting mental health awareness among young adults. Building on these findings, it can be concluded that strategies to increase mental health awareness among university students are insufficient if they only encourage the general use of social media; they must instead be directed toward purposeful and meaningful engagement. Therefore, higher education institutions, mental health practitioners, and digital content creators must develop materials and campaigns that align with students' main motivations for using social media, particularly in seeking information, personal assistance, and entertainment related to mental health education.

This study emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift in mental health education efforts through digital media, from merely encouraging exposure to social media to purposeful and motivated utilization. Being digital natives does not automatically mean that students possess adequate mental health literacy. Therefore, interventions are needed to encourage them to actively seek, understand, and apply relevant information to support their mental well-being in daily life.

Several constraints affected the generalizability of this study's findings. First, the relatively small sample size limits the extent to which the results can represent the broader undergraduate population. The study was also confined to two federal universities, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to institutions with different cultural or institutional contexts. Social desirability bias poses another significant limitation, as participants may have provided responses that align with socially acceptable views, especially regarding Mental Health Awareness and Social Media Usage. Although efforts were made to ensure confidentiality, implementing stricter anonymity protocols in future studies could reduce bias and improve data validity. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on undergraduate students, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other age groups or populations. By excluding non-regular social media

users, the study also missed the opportunity to explore the perspectives of individuals who engage with these platforms less frequently but may hold valuable insights into mental health awareness.

Conclusion

This study examined how Nigerian undergraduate students' social media use and motivational orientations relate to mental health awareness. The results showed that while general social media use alone did not correlate with mental health awareness, students' motivations for using these platforms were significantly predictive of their awareness levels. Furthermore, the combination of social Destroying the spree and Motivation Nuking spree offered a more robust predictor of Awareness than either variable alone.

Additionally, the study revealed a significant gender difference, with male students reporting higher levels of mental health awareness than female students. This suggests that mental health literacy interventions may need to be tailored to address possible disparities in access to information or engagement with mental health content across genders.

To effectively enhance mental health awareness among university students, interventions should not focus solely on limiting or increasing the use of social media. Rather, they should foster purposeful engagement with mental health content on these platforms, especially through motivational strategies that stimulate interest, utility, and participation.

Future research should address the limitations identified in this study. Expanding the sample size and including a wider range of universities—particularly those from different regions and institutional types–will enhance the generalizability of the findings. Ensuring full anonymity during data collection could also help reduce social desirability bias and encourage more honest responses.

In addition, future studies should include participants from other age groups and examine patterns of Mental Health Awareness among infrequent or non-users of social media. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Social Media Usage—and the lack thereof—affects Mental Health Awareness across diverse populations. Finally, future research may benefit from incorporating power analysis and employing probability-based sampling methods to strengthen the methodological rigor and representativeness of the results.

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