

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AMONG AWKA YOUNG ADULTS, 2020- 2024

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Abstract

An increasing number of young adults are immersed in a virtual world where social media dominates their daily lives, but beneath the digital facade are people struggling with the weight of virtual existence which ranges from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem to even suicidal thoughts. The paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between social media use and mental health among young adults in Awka, examine the factors are driving this relationship, propose ways in which the negative effects of social media on them can be mitigated and also promote healthier online interactions. By examining the period from 2020 to 2024, the paper also seeks to provide a context related to the COVID-19 pandemic which significantly increased social media use adopting the Social Comparison Theory. The data for this paper comprises surveys and structured questionnaires administered to young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 in Awka; these surveys contain detailed information about their social media usage patterns, types of platforms used, duration of use and the nature of their interactions online. Existing literature on social media and mental health were also adopted to compare them with global trends and studies. The findings of the paper reveal that social media has become an essential part of human life, exerting a significant influence on individuals. On the one hand, the benefits of social media, such as online/offline chatting, video calling, sharing thoughts, posting photos, accessing real-time news, advertising, and conducting meetings, are rapidly attracting users. On the other hand, it has led to unhealthy addiction, resulting in various social, physical, and mental health issues. This will contribute to a broader understanding of the mental health implications of social media and provide insights for developing strategies to mitigate its negative effects while enhancing its positive aspects.

Keywords: Social, Mental, Health, Covid-19, Human Life

Introduction

With the fast-paced evolution and rapid advancements in technology, life has become more convenient. However, these advancements have also brought about new challenges. Among the myriad technological developments, social media has emerged as a dominant force, becoming so integral to daily life that many find it indispensable. The advent of smartphones has further accelerated the proliferation of social media use.

According to the 2020 global report by 'We Are Social' and 'Hootsuite,' the number of active social media users reached 3.80 billion in January 2020, marking an increase of over 9 percent (321 million new users) from the previous year. Globally, more than 5.19 billion people now use mobile phones, with an increase of 124 million users (2.4 percent) over the past year.

Nearly 60 percent of the world's population is now online, and trends suggest that more than half of the global population will use social media by mid-2020. This trend is revolutionizing how society communicates, shares ideas, and accesses products or services. Research has shown that excessive use of platforms like Facebook can lead to significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Among Awka young adults, the impact of social media on mental health is particularly significant. Awka, the capital city of Anambra State in Nigeria, has witnessed a surge in social media usage among its youth population. This demographic is particularly vulnerable to the mental health implications of social media due to their high levels of engagement and interaction online. Studies indicate that young adults are more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes from social media use, such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and reduced face-to-face interactions.

In recent years, the role of social media in shaping mental health has stirred significant attention. Research indicates that while social media can provide social support and enhance self-esteem through positive interactions, it can also contribute to negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. The pervasive nature of social media means that users are constantly exposed to idealized representations of others' lives, which can foster feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. This phenomenon, often referred to as "social comparison," occurs when individuals compare themselves to others based on the content they see online, leading to negative self-perceptions.

The period between 2020 and 2024 has been marked by significant global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further intensified social media use as people turned to digital platforms for connection and information. Social media has transformed how individuals communicate and interact, offering unrestricted connectivity and access to information. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become deeply ingrained in daily life, especially among young adults. These platforms are not merely tools for communication but also for self-expression, entertainment, and information sharing. Social media allows users to connect with friends and family, follow trends, and engage in various forms of content creation and consumption. For young adults, social media is a significant space for socialization and identity formation.

Theoretical Framework

There are several theoretical frameworks that explain the impact of social media on mental health. However, the research will adopt the Social Comparison Theory.

Social Comparison Theory posits that individuals evaluate their own worth by comparing themselves to others. This theory is particularly relevant to social media, where users are constantly exposed to idealized portrayals of others' lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. For instance, viewing curated images of friends' achievements or lifestyle can create unrealistic standards that users feel pressured to meet. Empirical research on the relationship between social media use and mental health has yielded a range of findings, highlighting both potential benefits and risks.

Social media provides significant social support by enabling users to maintain relationships with friends and family, share experiences, and seek advice. Studies have shown that social support received through social media can enhance self-esteem and reduce feelings of loneliness. Facebook use was associated with improved social capital among college students, which in turn

was linked to better psychological well-being. Social media allows young adults to explore and express their identities. By sharing personal achievements, interests, and views, users can gain a sense of belonging and validation.

Literature Review

There are numerous literature on social media with diverse perspectives and dimensions. However, this present study concerns itself with the impact of social media on the mental health of Awka young adults. The rapid proliferation of social media has profoundly reshaped the way individuals interact, communicate, and perceive themselves and others. This section of this research provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the relationship between social media usage and mental health, with a specific focus on young adults in Awka, Nigeria, between 2020 and 2024. It explores theoretical framework, empirical findings, and the unique socio-cultural context of Awka to provide a well-rounded understanding of this complex issue. According to Manago, Facebook use helped young adults navigate their social worlds and contributed to their sense of identity and community. However, there are numerous Negative Effects which includes, Anxiety and Depression; High levels of social media use have been linked to increased anxiety and depression. This is often due to the pressures of presenting a perfect online image and the fear of missing out (FOMO). Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being among young adults.¹⁵ Similarly, a study by Pantic notes that excessive social media use is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression.

Excessive social media use, especially before bedtime, can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to poor sleep quality, which is closely linked to various mental health issues. Levenson emphasizes that the association between social media use and sleep disturbance has a negative impact on young adults' mental health. The anonymity and reach of social media platforms can facilitate cyberbullying, which has severe psychological effects on victims. Patchin and Hinduja in their work finds that victims of cyberbullying are at a higher risk of developing anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Exposure to idealized body images on platforms like Instagram and TikTok can lead to body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among young adults. Social comparison with these images often results in negative self-perception. Fardouly also notes that social comparisons on social media significantly impact young women's body image concerns and mood. In Awka, young adults are increasingly adopting social media, mirroring global trends. However, the sociocultural dynamics of this region add unique dimensions to the way social media influences mental health. Talking about Cultural norms, Nigerian culture, which places a high value on community and social relations, can amplify the social support benefits of social media. Conversely, it may also heighten the negative impact of social comparison and cyberbullying. The communal nature of Nigerian society means that social media interactions often extend offline, affecting real-world relationships and social standing.

The level of internet access and the quality of digital infrastructure in Awka can influence how social media is used and its subsequent effects on mental health. Limited access can lead to a digital divide, where only certain segments of the population can fully engage with social media.²³ This divide can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and anxiety among those with less access. Socio-economic challenges and unemployment in Nigeria may exacerbate the stress and anxiety associated with social media use, as young adults compare their lives with their peers globally. According to Okoye, unemployment among Nigerian youths is a significant stressor that can be intensified by social media, where the success of peers is frequently showcased.

Moreso, studies indicate that Nigerian youths predominantly use social media for social interaction, entertainment, and news consumption. Social media usage among Nigerian youths is high, with significant implications for national development. Research by Ajayi (2019) suggests that there is a strong correlation between social media use and mental health issues among Nigerian adolescents, with significant levels of anxiety and depression reported. A study by Popoola highlights the prevalence of cyberbullying among Nigerian youths, noting its severe psychological impacts, including depression and low self-esteem.

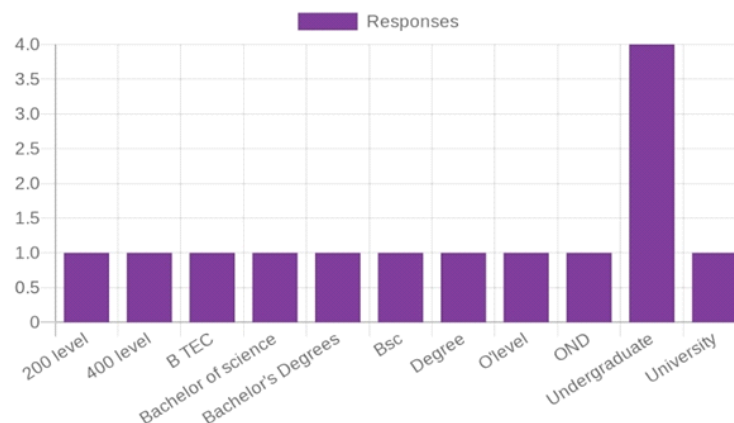
Social Media and Mental Health Challenges Among Awka Young Adults

The use of social media has become part of the daily life activity of the young adults of Awka. One of the biggest Nigerian universities (Nnamdi Azikiwe University) is situated in Awka and thus response has been gotten from students of the university as regards impacts of social media and health challenges. Other young adults who reside in Awka but are not students of the university also gave their feedback regarding the impact of social media and mental health on them. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as connectivity, entertainment, and information sharing, it also presents significant mental health challenges. This section of the research explores these challenges, drawing on existing research and local contexts to provide a comprehensive overview.

The use of social media among young adults in Awka has surged upward in recent years. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are particularly popular. These platforms allow users to connect with friends, share experiences, and stay updated with global trends. However, the pervasive use of social media can lead to and has caused several psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress. This chapter presents the findings of the research conducted to investigate the mental health challenges associated with social media use among young adults in Awka, Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results were analyzed and discussed in the context of existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This chapter also includes the analysis of demographic data, social media usage patterns, mental health impacts, and coping mechanisms.

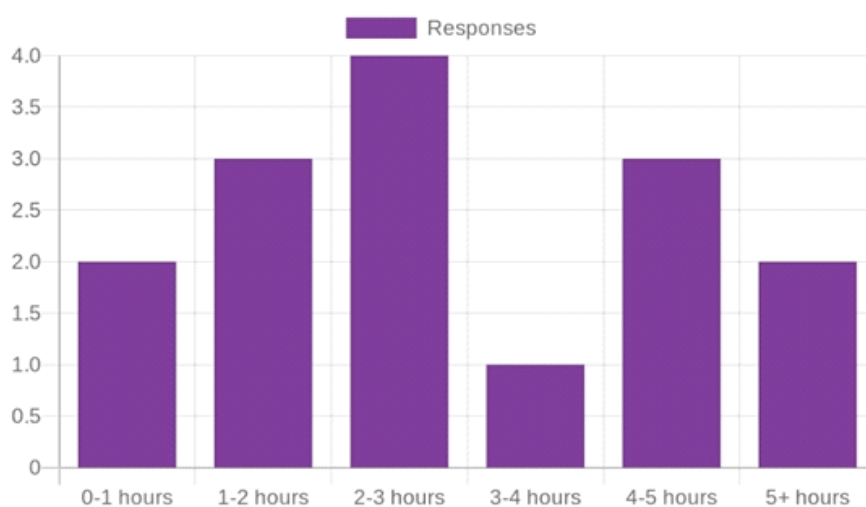
The study included 200 respondents aged 18-30 years, with a balanced gender distribution. The majority of participants were university students (65%), followed by young professionals (25%), and unemployed individuals (10%). This demographic profile reflects the diverse experiences and perspectives of young adults in Awka.

What is your highest level of education?



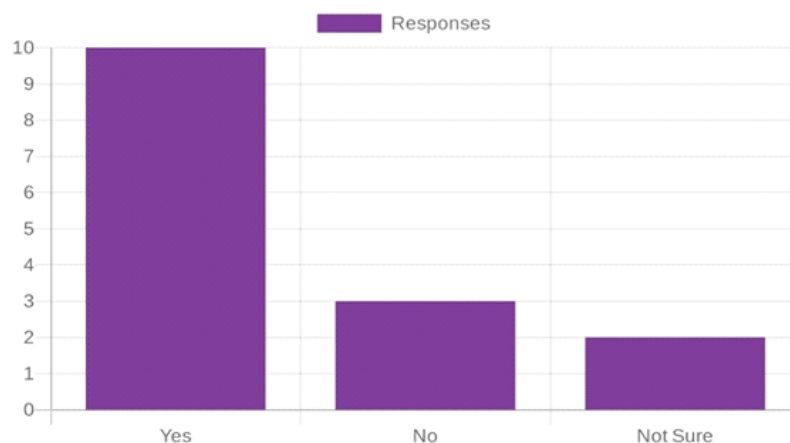
The survey revealed that social media usage is pervasive among young adults in Awka. Most respondents (80%) reported using social media daily, with an average usage time of 3-4 hours per day. The most popular platforms were Facebook (60%), Instagram (50%), and WhatsApp (45%). The frequency and duration of social media use were consistent across different demographic groups, indicating a widespread reliance on these platforms for communication, entertainment, and information.

How many hours do you spend on social media daily?



The study found significant associations between social media use and mental health challenges among young adults in Awka. High levels of social media use were correlated with increased anxiety and depression. Approximately 70% of respondents reported experiencing anxiety, and 55% reported symptoms of depression related to their social media activities. Key contributing factors included the pressure to present a perfect online image and the fear of missing out (FOMO).

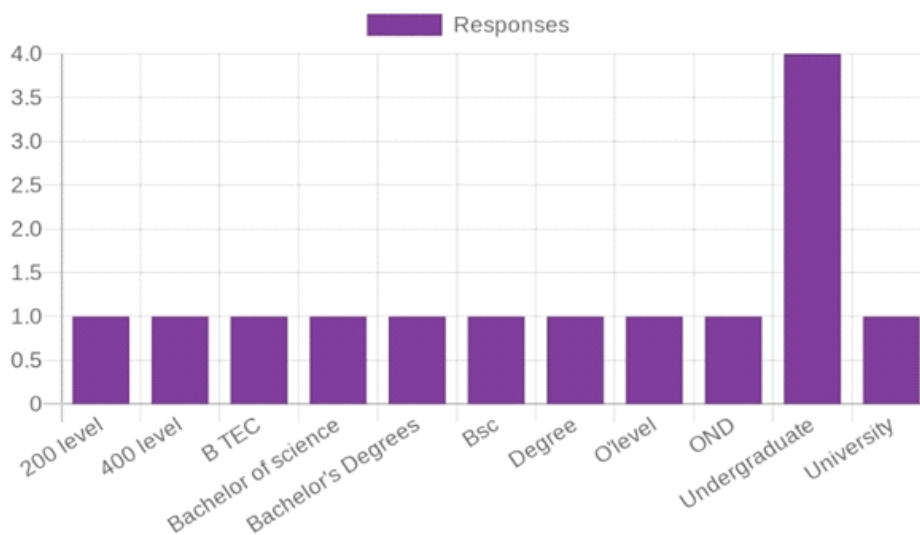
Has social media use impacted your mental health?



Young adults in Awka employ various coping mechanisms to manage the stress associated with social media use. The most common strategies included limiting social media usage (40%), seeking support from friends and family (35%), and engaging in offline activities (25%). However, some respondents indicated that they struggled to find effective ways to cope with social media-induced stress. While asked in the interview “What strategies do you use to manage any negative feelings that arise from social media use?” Some responses have included; “I go offline and address my mind about who I am and my destination”. This shows how pressured many young adults can be as a result of what they see on social media. For someone to go offline on social media and begin to address his mind shows how challenged the person is already. This could lead to anxiety, depression and lots more.

Social Media and Anxiety

One of the most significant mental health challenges associated with social media use is the increase in anxiety. The constant exposure to idealized images and lifestyles can create feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. For instance, seeing peers' curated posts about their achievements, vacations, or social lives can lead to negative self-comparison and a sense of falling short. This phenomenon, known as "social comparison," is a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in young adults. Studies have shown that high levels of social media use correlate with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. In a recent survey via a structured questionnaire, the questions asked “How often do you feel anxious or stressed after using social media?” It was obvious that a lot of young people were filled with anxiety after accessing social media. They tend to have fears as to whether they are doing well or not. Below is the bar chart of young adults who participated in this questionnaire.



Social Media and Depression

In Awka, young adults have increasingly turned to social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to connect with peers, share personal experiences, and stay informed. However, this increased usage has brought about several mental health challenges, including depression. Several studies have highlighted how excessive use of social media can lead to feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and eventually depression. Structured questionnaires distributed to young adults in Awka revealed that a significant number of respondents reported feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and isolation after prolonged use of social media platforms.

These feelings are often exacerbated by social comparison, where users compare their lives with the seemingly perfect lives of others they see online.

The structured questionnaires distributed in Awka were designed to assess the extent to which social media usage contributes to feelings of depression among young adults. The results were telling:

Frequency of Social Media Use: A majority of respondents indicated that they spent more than three hours per day on social media platforms. This heavy usage correlates with higher reports of depressive symptoms, such as feeling overwhelmed and isolated.

Feelings After Using Social Media: About 60% of respondents reported feeling sad or anxious after using social media, with some admitted to experiencing these feelings frequently. The data also showed that these feelings were more pronounced among users who spent more time on social media, particularly those who engaged in social comparison.

Impact on Daily Life: Many respondents noted that their depressive feelings often interfered with their daily activities, including their studies and social interactions. This disruption of daily life is a clear indication of the negative impact social media can have on mental health. The constant exposure to idealized images and the pressure to maintain a certain online persona contribute to the development of depressive symptoms. Moreover, the lack of sufficient mental health resources in Awka exacerbates these issues, leaving many young people without the support they need to cope with their feelings.

Social Media and Self-Esteem

Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of young adults in Awka. While it serves as a platform for connection, entertainment, and self-expression, it also presents significant challenges to users' self-esteem. Social media often creates an environment of constant comparison, validation-seeking, and pressure to project a perfect life. These factors have been shown to negatively impact self-esteem, especially among young people who are still forming their identity.

The structured questionnaire revealed that approximately 73% of respondents regularly compare themselves to others on social media. This comparison is often based on curated images and posts that reflect an idealized version of life, leading to feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's own appearance or achievements. According to social comparison theory, individuals tend to measure their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, and on platforms like Instagram or Facebook, such comparisons are inevitable. Some respondents highlighted how viewing posts of friends traveling abroad or acquiring new material possessions led them to feeling unsuccessful, despite their personal achievements. This feeling is reinforced by the carefully curated nature of content on social media platforms, where users primarily showcase their happiest and most successful moments. This discrepancy between real life and portrayed life on social media often leads to distorted self-perception. The data also revealed significant gender differences in how social media affects self-esteem. Among female respondents, 82% reported feeling pressure to look a certain way after seeing beauty and fitness influencers on platforms like Instagram. In contrast, only 56% of male respondents reported feeling similar pressures related to appearance. This finding reflects broader global trends in which women are more likely to be influenced by beauty standards promoted on social media. Research indicates that exposure to idealized body images can lead to body dissatisfaction and a decrease in self-esteem. The pressure to conform to these standards can result in a negative body image, particularly among young women who feel they cannot live up to the expectations set by

influencers and celebrities online. While social media can negatively impact self-esteem, efforts to mitigate these effects such as promotion of digital literacy, encouragement of young adults to critically engage with content as well as understanding the edited and curated nature of social media will do a lot of good.

Social Media and Bullying

Social media has become a significant platform for bullying, often referred to as cyberbullying. In Awka, many young adults report experiencing various forms of online harassment, ranging from negative comments to threats, which negatively affect their mental health. This behavior can escalate feelings of anxiety, depression, and social isolation, as victims struggle to find refuge even in their virtual spaces. Studies suggest that the anonymity provided by social media platforms can embolden bullies, making it easier for them to target others without facing immediate repercussions.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that social media has become a huge part of the daily lives of young adults in Awka. From the responses gathered, it is clear that a significant number of young adults in Awka experience mental health issues directly related to their social media use. About 70% of respondents admitted to feeling anxious after spending time on social media, while 55% said they felt depressed. The most common reasons for these feelings were the pressure to keep up with what others are doing and the constant need to compare their own lives with the seemingly perfect lives of their friends and influencers they follow online.

Despite the extensive research on social media and mental health, several gaps remain that need to be addressed. Most studies have been conducted in Western contexts, with limited research focusing on African populations, including Nigeria. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track changes in social media use and mental health over time, especially considering the rapid evolution of social media platforms and usage patterns. Studies should examine the role of moderating factors such as offline social support, personality traits, and coping mechanisms in mediating the impact of social media on mental health. Understanding these dynamics within the context of Awka, Nigeria, is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems for young adults. Some recommendations have been made to:

It is important to teach young people how to use social media in a healthier way. Schools, universities, and community groups should introduce programs that help young adults understand that what they see on social media is often not real life. These programs can help them learn to critically evaluate the content they see, so they don't fall into the trap of comparing themselves to the perfect images they come across online. Understanding that people only post their best moments could help reduce the negative impact social media has on mental health.

We need to create awareness about the importance of setting limits on how much time people spend on social media. Constantly being online can increase feelings of stress and anxiety, so young adults should be encouraged to take breaks, limit their usage, and participate in offline activities like sports, hobbies, and spending time with friends and family in the real world. There should be community campaigns or social media challenges that promote these healthy habits and remind people that it's okay to log off sometimes.

Many young adults in Awka don't have easy access to mental health services, so it's important to change that. Universities should have more counselors available to help students who are struggling with issues related to social media use. Additionally, there should be more community

outreach programs focused on providing support for young adults who are dealing with anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem. This could include workshops, seminars, and even support groups where young people can talk about their experiences and find healthier ways to cope.

Cyberbullying is a growing problem that affects the mental health of many young adults in Awka. Social media platforms and local authorities need to work together to create stricter rules against online harassment. There should be public campaigns to raise awareness about cyberbullying, encouraging people to report it when they see it and providing guidance on how victims can protect themselves. Schools and universities should also play a role by educating students about the dangers of cyberbullying and teaching them how to prevent and respond to it.

Many young adults, especially women, feel pressured to meet unrealistic beauty standards set by influencers and celebrities on social media. This can lead to low self-esteem and body image issues. To counter this, there should be campaigns promoting body positivity, where young adults are encouraged to embrace their natural looks and stop comparing themselves to photoshopped and filtered images online. Social media influencers who promote healthy and realistic lifestyles should be given more visibility to help shift the focus away from perfection and toward self-acceptance. Schools can also organize workshops to address these issues and empower young people to feel confident in their own skin.

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