



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE ON YOUTH BEHAVIOR AND PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Social media has become deeply embedded in the lives of Nigerian youth, fundamentally shaping their behaviors, perceptions, and developmental trajectories. This comprehensive literature review synthesizes recent empirical evidence on the impact of social media exposure on youth behavior and perception, drawing on peer-reviewed Nigerian and international scholarship published. The review critically examines theoretical frameworks explaining the mechanisms through which social media influences youth outcomes, evaluates methodological approaches, and synthesizes findings across five key domains: mental health and well-being, political and civic perception, identity formation and cultural engagement, online risks and digital dangers, and protective strategies. The analysis reveals that Nigerian youth exhibit high levels of social media engagement, with over 95% of adolescents reporting active use and many spending over three hours daily. Exposure to harmful content, including sexually explicit material, fraudulent schemes, and aggressive interactions, is significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores. Politically, Nigerian youth demonstrate robust online advocacy but limited offline participation, with fear of violence and distrust in electoral processes serving as primary barriers. Indigenous identity influences digital content creation, though a disconnect persists between youth and their cultural heritage in digital spaces. This review identifies critical gaps in longitudinal research, the need for culturally grounded intervention strategies, and emerging evidence on digital citizenship education, providing actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and future researchers.

Keywords: *Social media, youth, mental health, political participation, digital identity, cyberbullying, & body image*

Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the developmental landscape for Nigerian youth. Unlike previous generations whose social interactions, information consumption, and identity exploration occurred primarily in offline contexts, today's Nigerian adolescents and young adults navigate a digital environment where platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as central arenas for social connection, self-presentation, and meaning-making (Ademakinwa, 2024; Ngonso et al., 2024). By 2025, Nigeria had emerged as one of Africa's largest social media markets, with youth constituting the most engaged and simultaneously the most vulnerable demographic segment.

The significance of understanding social media's impact on Nigerian youth is underscored by converging evidence of both benefits and harms. Social media can provide essential peer support, facilitate identity exploration, and enable civic engagement (Sokoga, 2024). Yet, it is also associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying, and problematic use (Olibamoyo et al., 2025; Odukoya & Adeyeye, 2025). The Mothers and Marginalised Advocacy Centre (MAMA Centre) and Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF) Nigeria recently raised alarms over the rising digital risks confronting Nigerian adolescents, warning that unchecked social media use is harming the well-being, academic performance, and mental health of schoolchildren (Kanu & Uwandu-Iwuchukwu, 2025).

The Nigerian context presents unique dimensions to the social media–youth nexus. With over 95% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 reporting active social media use and many spending over three hours daily, the scale of exposure is substantial (Kanu & Uwandu-Iwuchukwu, 2025). However, empirical research specifically examining these relationships within the Nigerian context has historically been limited. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) note that while recent reports highlight associations between social networking site use and depression and anxiety internationally, there still exists a paucity of data on these relationships in Nigeria, where social media adoption has rapidly increased.

This review aims to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive and critical synthesis of recent empirical evidence on the impact of social media exposure on youth behavior and perception, with particular emphasis on Nigerian scholarship. Drawing on studies published between 2024 and 2026, the review addresses five core questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks explain the mechanisms through which social media influences Nigerian youth outcomes? (2) What does the empirical evidence reveal about social media's effects on youth mental health, well-being, and behavior in Nigeria? (3) How does social media shape youth political perceptions and civic engagement? (4) What role does social media play in identity formation, cultural engagement, and content creation among Nigerian youth? and (5) What implications do the findings have for policy, practice, and future research in Nigeria?

Conceptualizing Social Media Exposure in the Nigerian Context

A critical challenge in synthesizing evidence on social media's impact is the diverse conceptualization and measurement of exposure across studies. Nigerian researchers have employed varied approaches to capture the complexity of youth engagement with digital platforms. Ademakinwa (2024) investigated indigenous identity, social integration, and digital content creation among university students in South-west Nigeria, employing a mixed-method approach with quantitative analysis of 441 students and qualitative content analysis of six university students' association social media platforms. The study operationalized social media

engagement across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, revealing that while students demonstrated high levels of social integration, there was little or no integration with the larger community of non-students, and a disconnect between university students and their indigenous identity in digital content creation.

Olibamoyo et al. (2025) conceptualized social media exposure in terms of time spent, types of platforms used, and the nature of content encountered, distinguishing between general use and exposure to specific harmful content types such as sexually explicit material, false information, quarrelsome or bullying content, and fraudulent schemes.

Recent Nigerian studies provide robust evidence on the prevalence and patterns of youth social media engagement. Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) reported that over 95% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 in Nigeria report active social media use, with many spending over three hours daily across various platforms. This level of engagement places Nigerian youth among the most digitally connected populations globally. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) conducted a cross-sectional study evaluating social networking site activity and its association with mental health among young people in Lagos, Nigeria. The study found that over 75% of respondents were active on social networking sites, with almost half spending 181–600 minutes per day online.

Ngonso et al. (2024) examined social media access among secondary school students in Edo North, Edo State, revealing that Nigerian teenagers of school age have access to social media, prefer text, video, and audio kinds of information, and mostly prefer Facebook to other social media networking sites.

Social Media Influences on Youth Behavior

The Nigerian literature identifies multiple mechanisms through which social media influences youth behavior and perception. Drawing on the synthesis by Sokoga (2024) and Ngonso et al. (2024), these mechanisms can be organized into risk pathways and protective pathways. Ngonso et al. (2024) examined the psychological impact of social media on Nigerian teenagers, looking at how social media posts and tweets influence their perceptions towards migrating abroad. The study found that social media messages significantly affect teenagers' mental constructs, which the authors compared to "mental slavery," a phenomenon where idealized portrayals of life abroad shape migration aspirations and perceptions of Nigeria.

According to compensatory internet use theory, individuals experiencing persistent negative emotions may rely on online platforms as coping mechanisms. Odukoya and Adeyeye (2025) examined state failure, youths' dual victimization, and the unabated terror of internet crime in Nigeria, noting that socioeconomic marginalization pushes some youth toward problematic online engagement, including participation in internet fraud.

Ijiola et al. (2025) applied social learning theory to understand delinquent career choices among youths in Ibadan, Nigeria, demonstrating that exposure to glorified portrayals of internet fraud on social media normalizes such behaviors and influences career aspirations. Ojo (2025) however, found that while Nigerian youth are actively engaged in online political discussions, with over half (51.2%) engaging daily primarily on WhatsApp, followed by Facebook and X, this engagement occurs within echo chambers that may not translate into broader political awareness or offline participation.

The impact of social media on Nigerian youth is not uniform across developmental stages or contextual factors. Ijiola et al. (2025) revealed that social media usage interacts with childhood trauma and peer pressure to influence delinquent career choices, including involvement in internet fraud. This finding highlights the importance of considering cumulative risk factors rather than examining social media exposure in isolation. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) found that young people in Lagos reported frequent exposure to sexually explicit content, false information, quarrelsome or bullying content, desirable advertisements, hacking, fraud, and nasty comments. Each of these content types was significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores, with regression analysis identifying desirable advertisements, fraud, and nasty comments as independent predictors of depression.

The association between social media exposure and adverse mental health outcomes has been established in Nigerian research. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) found that frequent exposure to sexually explicit content, false information, quarrelsome or bullying content, desirable advertisements, hacking, fraud, and nasty comments in the past three months was significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores ($p < 0.001$). Regression analysis identified desirable advertisements, fraud, and nasty comments as independent predictors of depression, while only desirable advertisements significantly predicted anxiety.

This finding is particularly significant as it identifies specific content types, rather than social media use per se, as drivers of adverse mental health outcomes. The authors recommend interventions addressing harmful social networking site experiences, alongside improved moderation and media literacy initiatives, to safeguard youth mental health in Nigeria.

Ngonso et al. (2024) found that exposure to idealized body images and lifestyle portrayals on social media contributes to body dissatisfaction among Nigerian teenagers, influencing their self-perception and migration aspirations. The study noted that social media posts often present unrealistic standards that adolescents internalize, leading to psychological distress. Odukoya and Adeyeye (2025) observed that the pressure to maintain an idealized online image, particularly among female youth, contributes to psychological vulnerability and may increase susceptibility to online exploitation and fraud. The authors note that the social and psychological costs of internet engagement remain excruciatingly high, with youths often at the receiving end either as users or victims.

The relationship between social media use and academic outcomes has been examined in Nigerian research. Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) highlighted that social media can disrupt sleep, reduce focus on homework and physical activity, and expose adolescents to harmful online behavior, all of which negatively affect educational outcomes. The organizations emphasized that the goal is not to ban social media, but to equip students and families with tools to navigate it safely. Ijiola et al. (2025) found that excessive social media engagement among youths in Ibadan was associated with reduced academic focus and increased involvement in delinquent activities, suggesting that problematic use patterns have cascading effects on educational attainment.

The Nigerian literature also identifies multiple mechanisms through which social media influences youth outcomes. Table 1 synthesizes key mechanisms with supporting evidence.

Table 1. *Mechanisms Linking Social Media to Youth Outcomes in Nigerian Research*

Mechanism	Description	Outcomes Affected	Evidence Strength	Representative References
Social Comparison	Comparing self to curated, idealized representations	Body dissatisfaction, migration aspirations, low self-esteem	Strong	Ngonso et al. (2024)
Compensatory Use	Using social media to escape negative emotions	Problematic use, fraud involvement, addiction	Moderate	Odukoya & Adeyeye (2025)
Social Learning	Observing and imitating online behaviors	Delinquent career choices, cyberbullying	Moderate	Ijiola et al. (2025)
Content Exposure	Exposure to specific harmful content types	Depression, anxiety, cognitive dissonance	Strong	Olibamoyo et al. (2025)
Echo Chambers	Algorithmic reinforcement of existing beliefs	Political polarization, limited civic awareness	Emerging	Ojo (2025)
Identity Expression	Digital content creation reflecting cultural identity	Cultural connection, social integration	Moderate	Ademakinwa (2024)

Source: *Author's Tabulation*

The cumulative evidence from recent Nigerian studies supports several robust conclusions about social media's impact on youth. First, Nigerian youth exhibit high levels of social media engagement, with over 95% of adolescents reporting active use and many spending over three hours daily (Kanu & Uwandu-Iwuchukwu, 2025; Olibamoyo et al., 2025).

Second, exposure to harmful content is consistently associated with adverse mental health outcomes. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) identified that frequent exposure to sexually explicit content, false information, bullying content, desirable advertisements, hacking, fraud, and nasty comments is significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores. Ngonso et al. (2024) demonstrated that appearance-related content contributes to body dissatisfaction and psychological distress.

Third, a significant gap exists between online political engagement and offline political participation among Nigerian youth. Ojo (2025) found that while over half of youth engage daily in online political discussions, over half have never voted, protested, or attended political rallies. Fear of violence and distrust in electoral processes serve as primary barriers.

Fourth, indigenous identity significantly influences digital content creation, yet findings suggest a disconnect between youth and their cultural heritage in digital spaces (Ademakinwa, 2024). This tension between global digital culture and local cultural identity warrants further investigation.

Social Media and Youth Political Perception

The political dimension of youth social media engagement has received substantial attention in recent Nigerian research. Ojo (2025) conducted a study titled "Comparative Analysis of Online Advocacy for Good Governance and Actual Political Involvement among Nigerian Youths,"

revealed that Nigerian youths are actively engaged in online political discussions on good governance, with over half (51.2%) doing so daily, primarily on WhatsApp, followed by Facebook and X. The most common online activities were commenting on political discussions and sharing governance-related posts. This high level of digital political engagement suggests that social media serves as a critical arena for political discourse and civic expression among Nigerian youth.

Despite robust online engagement, Ojo (2025) identified a significant gap between online advocacy and offline political participation. The study found that offline political participation was generally low, as over half (50.1%) of respondents had never voted, protested, or attended political rallies. Among those who had participated offline, engagement was irregular, with most doing so only occasionally, while the majority had not joined political parties or attended political training.

This disconnect between online and offline political engagement has concerning implications for democratic participation. Ojo (2025) emphasized that "good governance is anchored on transparency and accountability, but when young people do not even know who represents them, it becomes difficult to demand accountability." The study found that majority of respondents did not know their representatives at ward level, state house of assembly, federal house of representatives, and in the senate, both in their states of residence and origin.

Shehu Sani, former Nigerian senator, has publicly commented on this phenomenon, urging Nigerians in their 30s, 40s, and 50s to stop engaging only in online debates while younger politicians occupy elective positions, emphasizing that political participation should go beyond online engagement (Sani, 2026). Ojo (2025) identified fear of violence as the main barrier to offline political participation among Nigerian youth, followed by lack of interest and distrust in the electoral body, with most youths reporting that they felt unsafe engaging in offline political activities. This finding is significant as it suggests that safety concerns, rather than apathy, may underlie apparent political disengagement.

Despite these challenges, the study identified several positive indicators. Offline participation among the youth is largely motivated by the desire to promote good governance (69.7%), personal civic beliefs, and dissatisfaction with government policies. Most youths who had participated in offline political activities possessed Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), had attended rallies or protests, and had voted previously, including in the most recent elections.

The study also established that improved security, greater transparency, electoral credibility, and reduced corruption would encourage greater participation, with a strong majority (84.2%) expressing willingness to be more active in offline political activities if these concerns were addressed (Ojo, 2025).

Social Media and Peacebuilding

Sokoga (2024) examined the relationship between youth and social media for peacebuilding in Nigeria, noting that the prevalent use of social media among young people has often been associated more with the spread of misinformation and polarization than as a constructive tool for fostering peace. However, the study identified an emerging recognition of social media's potential to serve as a platform for empowerment and positive social transformation.

Using a Social Cognition Theory lens, Sokoga (2024) analyzed how youths utilize social media to process information about conflict, peace efforts, and community dynamics. The study concluded that the use of social media by Nigerian youth for peacebuilding has proven to be a powerful tool that has brought about positive change in their communities. Leveraging the internet, youth are able to mobilize, communicate, and share their voices, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and peaceful society.

Odukoya and Adeyeye (2025) noted that the digital space has become a site of cultural negotiation for Nigerian youth, where they navigate between traditional values and globalized digital cultures. This negotiation can be both empowering and disorienting, contributing to identity conflicts. The disconnect between online social integration and offline community connection identified by Ademakinwa (2024) has significant implications. While students demonstrated high levels of social integration within their peer networks on digital platforms, this integration did not extend to the broader community. The study recommended the intentional adoption and targeted use of digital content in sensitive educational practices that leverage the positive influence of indigenous identity and social integration on digital platforms, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

Challenges Associated with Social Media Use among the Youths

The prevalence of exposure to harmful content among Nigerian youth has been documented across multiple studies. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) identified that young people in Lagos reported frequent exposure to sexually explicit content, false information, quarrelsome or bullying content, desirable advertisements, hacking, fraud, and nasty comments. Each of these content types was significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores. Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) highlighted that social media can disrupt sleep, reduce focus on homework and physical activity, and expose adolescents to harmful online behavior. The organizations emphasized that the goal is not to ban social media, but to equip students and families with tools to navigate it safely.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant concern in Nigerian youth digital engagement. Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) noted that cyberbullying, online predators, misinformation, violent content, and risky online challenges represent significant threats to adolescent well-being. To mitigate these risks, they recommended that adolescents report and block inappropriate users, avoid oversharing personal information, adjust privacy settings, and involve trusted adults when meeting online acquaintances. Ijiola et al. (2025) found that exposure to online bullying and aggressive content contributes to psychological distress and may increase vulnerability to delinquent career choices, as youth seek belonging in alternative online communities.

Ijiola et al. (2025) investigated childhood trauma, peer pressure, social media usage, and delinquent career choice among youths in Ibadan, Nigeria. The study, published in the NIU Journal of Social Sciences, revealed complex interrelationships among these factors. Social media usage interacts with childhood trauma and peer pressure to influence delinquent career choices, including involvement in internet fraud (commonly referred to as "Yahoo Yahoo" in Nigerian parlance). Odukoya and Adeyeye (2025) examined state failure, youths' dual victimization, and the unabated terror of internet crime in Nigeria. The authors note that the social and psychological costs of internet crime remain excruciatingly high, with youths always at the receiving ends either as users or victims. The study highlighted how social media platforms have become arenas for the glorification of fraudulent lifestyles, normalizing deviance among impressionable youth.

Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) warned of risky online challenges that circulate on social media platforms, which can lead to physical harm, psychological distress, and even death. They called on parents, guardians, and teachers to maintain open, non-judgmental dialogue, monitor distress signals, and use parental-control tools on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Improving Social Media Engagement Among Youths

Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy

Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) called on schools to integrate digital citizenship, media literacy, and cyberbullying awareness into curricula and provide confidential access to counselors. This recommendation aligns with international best practices for mitigating online risks while preserving the benefits of digital engagement. Ademakinwa (2024) recommended the intentional adoption and targeted use of digital content in sensitive educational practices that leverage the positive influence of indigenous identity and social integration on digital platforms, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. The study suggested that educational institutions should develop strategies to help students connect their digital engagement with meaningful cultural and community participation.

Parental and School-Based Interventions

Ngonso et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of parental engagement in monitoring and guiding adolescent social media use, noting that parents often lack awareness of the content their children encounter online. They recommended school-based programs that educate both students and parents about safe social media practices. Olibamoyo et al. (2025) suggested that mental health services in schools and communities should incorporate screening for problematic social media use and exposure to harmful content, particularly given the strong associations with depression and anxiety.

Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

Kanu and Uwandu-Iwuchukwu (2025) urged tech companies to establish local content-moderation teams and advocated for comprehensive online safety legislation to protect young users. The organizations concluded that protecting adolescents online requires collective action by families, schools, policymakers, and technology companies, ensuring that young Nigerians benefit from digital innovation while being shielded from its dangers. Ojo (2025) recommended urgent reforms to improve security before, during, and after elections to encourage offline political participation of youth and elevate trust in the electoral system. The researcher also called for increased enlightenment of Nigerian youths to improve their understanding of their political leaders and reforms to restore the confidence of Nigerian youths in the electoral process. Odukoya and Adeyeye (2025) advocated for multi-sectoral approaches addressing the socioeconomic drivers of youth involvement in internet fraud, including poverty alleviation, educational opportunities, and alternative livelihood programs, alongside digital literacy initiatives.

Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review has critically examined recent empirical evidence on the impact of social media exposure on youth behavior and perception, with particular emphasis on Nigerian scholarship. The synthesis of studies published between 2024 and 2026 reveals that Nigerian youth exhibit high levels of social media engagement, with substantial implications for mental health, political participation, identity formation, and behavioral outcomes. The evidence demonstrates that exposure to harmful content—including sexually explicit material, fraudulent

schemes, and aggressive interactions, is significantly associated with higher depression and anxiety scores among Nigerian youth. Politically, Nigerian youth demonstrate robust online advocacy but limited offline participation, with fear of violence and distrust in electoral processes serving as primary barriers. Indigenous identity significantly influences digital content creation, though findings suggest a disconnect between youth and their cultural heritage in digital spaces.

The evidence reviewed has important implications for Nigerian policymakers, educators, and researchers. For policymakers, the findings underscore the need for regulatory frameworks that hold platforms accountable for harmful content and comprehensive online safety legislation. For educators, the evidence supports investment in digital citizenship education that empowers youth to navigate the digital landscape critically and safely. For researchers, the review identifies critical gaps in longitudinal research, geographically diverse samples, and culturally grounded intervention strategies.

As social media platforms continue to evolve and artificial intelligence becomes increasingly integrated into digital environments, the imperative for rigorous, context-sensitive research in Nigeria has never been greater. The evidence synthesized in this review provides a foundation for understanding how social media shapes Nigerian youth behavior and perception while highlighting the urgent need for continued investigation of the mechanisms, moderators, and interventions that can promote healthy digital engagement for the next generation of Nigerians.

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