

IMPACT OF SUSTAINED SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUTHS IN ENUGU STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of sustained social media exposure on the mental health of youths in Enugu State. The study sought to determine the extent to which continuous engagement with social media platforms influences students' mental health, with particular focus on anxiety, depression, and mental breakdown tendencies. The research adopted a descriptive survey design involving a sample of 373 youths drawn through multistage sampling technique from a population of 1,078,287 youths. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distributions) and a t-test to test the study's hypothesis. Findings revealed that a large proportion of youths in Enugu State (33.4%) spend 3–4 hours daily on social media, while 24.8% spend over 5 hours, showing high levels of digital engagement. The analysis further indicated that 41.8% of respondents experience moderate anxiety, 38.7% report high anxiety, and 42.9% exhibit high exposure to social media, suggesting a strong correlation between sustained online engagement and psychological distress. Additionally, 78% of youths showed moderate to high depression tendencies linked to excessive social media use. The t-test result showed a statistically significant difference in depression levels between youths with high (mean = 4.2) and low (mean = 2.8) exposure to social media ($t = 14.62$, $df = 212$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that frequent social media use contributes significantly to depression tendencies. The study concludes that sustained social media exposure negatively affects the mental health of youths, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and mental strain. It emphasises the urgent need for digital literacy education, mental health counseling, and structured awareness programmes to help youths manage online behaviour effectively. The study recommended that there should be continuous effort toward digital literacy and social media management programs geared towards enlightening youths on the healthy use of digital platforms.

Keywords: Impact, social media, exposure, mental health, youths

1.0 Introduction

The rise of social media platforms has been nothing short of exponential, transforming communication and interaction across the globe. The advent of smartphones and increased internet accessibility further fuelled this growth, making social media an integral part of everyday life. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn have emerged, each catering to specific demographics and interests, contributing to the vast diversity of social media experiences available today (Ajewumi, Magbagbeola, Kalu, Ike, Folajimi and Diyaolu, 2024). Social media plays a significant role in daily life, influencing how individuals communicate, share information, and interact with one another. It serves as a primary means of communication for many, facilitating connections among friends, family, and colleagues, regardless of geographical barriers.

Social media has become a vital tool for information dissemination, allowing users to stay updated on current events, trends, and topics of interest (Pew Research Center, 2021). In addition to personal communication, businesses leverage social media for marketing and customer engagement, utilising platforms to reach wider audiences and foster brand loyalty (Khan, 2017). Social media's impact extends to mental health, where it can affect users positively and negatively, leading to increased connectivity and contributing to issues like anxiety and depression due to social comparison and cyber bullying (Twenge, 2019).

Overuse of social media by students decreased in-person social contacts and exposed them to false information, lies, and extravagant lifestyles that were fabricated. leaves them feeling alone and inferior to their peers. They feel socially inferior for not being able to afford such luxurious lifestyles that include eating at fancy restaurants, shopping at designer stores, and travelling in fancy cars since they typically believe that others are more loved, content, and connected (Moyo, Gambiza & Majeed, 2023). The concept of social media-induced depression tendency – which can lead to outcomes like anxiety and suicide – was borne out of the opportunities social media has created for misinformation and high expectations that can be overstated. This diverts students' attention from their studies and instead encouraging them to aim for goals that are unrealistic for their stage of life. Social media use distorts reality; users may appear happy and contented while actually experiencing misery and loneliness. The picture-perfect lives that are promoted on Facebook and Instagram are contributing to the eating problems and body image issues that the younger generation is facing (McCrae, Gettings & Purssell, 2017).

Furthermore, social media use has been linked to concerns with depression, anxiety, and other aspects of mental health. For many students, social media has turned into an addiction that might interfere with their everyday life if they are constantly exposed to social media feeds. Social media

users frequently make comparisons between their lives and the "perfect" lives depicted by social media influencers which can cause inadequacy and low self-esteem (Deepa & Priya, 2020). In addition to disrupting sleep patterns and quality, excessive social media usage can cause these problems. Before going to bed, using social media might disrupt sleep patterns. Sleep deprivation has been linked to mood swings, tension, and anxiety levels that are higher. The physical health of users might also suffer as a result of social networking. Obesity and other related health problems can result from using social media excessively, as can a lack of exercise. It is vital to recognise, though, that social media may also be beneficial for mental health. Social media may be used as a way to connect with loved ones and forging deep connections with others. People have the chance to share their problems and experiences with others who might be going through similar circumstances thanks to social media platforms (Levenson, Shensa, Sidani, Colditz & Primack, 2016).

Despite the positive aspects of social media, concerns have emerged regarding its potential negative impacts on mental health, especially among youth. Issues such as cyber bullying, social comparison, and excessive use have raised questions about potential negative consequences (Ágnes & Marc, 2023; Vítor & Alessandra, 2023). Additionally, the use of social media before bedtime has been found to impair sleep quality, further affecting mental and physical health (Young et al., 2023). It is crucial to promote mindful and healthy use of social media to protect the well-being of individuals (Falimu, 2023).

The mental health of youths is a critical aspect of their overall well-being, influencing academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and prospects (World Health Organisation, 2020). Understanding the relationship between social media exposure and mental health is paramount, especially in Nigeria, where a significant portion of the population comprises young individuals. When social media began to gain widespread popularity, initial concerns about its impact on mental health emerged primarily from anecdotal evidence and early studies. Multiple studies have correlated excessive social media use with mental health problems, including depression (Liang, Kutok, Rosen, Burke & Ranney, 2023; Taylor-Jackson & Moustafa, 2021). Other studies have explored the positive effects of social media use, particularly in communities, promoting identity development and belonging, without focusing on the mental health of users, especially youths. It is against this backdrop that this study investigates the impact of sustained social exposure on the mental health of youths in Enugu State.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

As social the influence of media expanded, researchers began to conduct more rigorous studies to investigate the relationship between the use of social media and mental health outcomes. A growing body of literature has consistently found both positive and negative effects. On one hand, social media has provided support networks, fostered connections, and promoted positive interactions (Frison &

Eggermont, 2016). On the other hand, excessive use and exposure to negative content have been associated with increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness (Twenge et al., 2017). Recent meta-analyses suggest that the correlation between social media use and mental health outcomes is complex and influenced by various factors, including the type of platform used, individual differences, and the context of social interactions (Smahel et al., 2020). The nuanced findings indicate that while social media can be a source of distress for some, it can also serve as a valuable tool for others, underscoring the need for tailored interventions and awareness about healthy social media practices. Despite the widespread use of social media, there is a dearth of research specifically examining how sustained exposure to social media impacts on the mental health of youths, particularly in Enugu State. The concern arises from the increasing reports of mental health challenges among young people globally and the potential role that social media may play in exacerbating or alleviating these issues. To address this gap in literature, this study seeks to investigate the impact of sustained social media exposure on the mental health status of youths in Enugu State.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the impact of sustained social media exposure on the mental health status of youths in Enugu State.

The specific objectives are:

- i. To find out the duration of time spent on social media platforms by youths in Enugu State.
- ii. To ascertain if the amount of time spent on social media contribute to the levels of anxiety among youths in Enugu State.
- iii. To determine the extent to which exposure to the social media leads to mental breakdown among youths in Enugu State.
- iv. To find out if regular exposure to the social media contributes to depression tendencies among youths in Enugu State.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

- i. What is the duration of time spent on social media platforms by youths in Enugu State?
- ii. Does the amount of time spent on social media contribute to the levels of anxiety among youths in Enugu State?
- iii. What is the extent to which exposure to the social media leads to mental breakdown among youths in Enugu State?

- iv. Does regular exposure to the social media contribute to depression tendencies among youths in Enugu State?

2.0 Literature Review

Social media depict online tools and platforms that allow people communicate with each other, produce content, share information and materials. There are many social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, which are used for different purposes (Segado-Boj, DíazCampo, Fernández-Gómez & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019). There are also sites where users can share photos and videos, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019). Additionally, others include Discord, Reddit, online communities and fora, blogging and microblogging platforms, such as Tumblr and WordPress (Tiidenberg, Hendry, & Abidin, 2021).

Social media now plays a crucial role in young adults' everyday lives. It is an important part of contemporary youth culture because of its broad adoption and frequent use affecting their identity construction, communication, and information access (Gennaro & Miller, 2021). It offers platforms for worldwide interaction, communication, and self-expression. It has completely changed how people communicate, exchange information, and relate to content. It has provided opportunity for people to connect with friends, family, and even completely unrelated individuals online and take part in an array of social activities. Social media has both positive and negative impact on the society. Online behaviours, communication processes, information sharing, and mental health challenges can affect individuals.

Smith and Storrs (2023), contend that social media is any online platform that allows people to create, share, and exchange ideas, contents, and information within online communities and networks. This includes all digital channels, such as YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok. They explained that social media offers platforms for worldwide interactions, communication, and self-expression. It is a means for interfaces among people, that allows them to create, share, exchange information and ideas through mobile phones and/or computer networks, popularly referred to as virtual networking. Social media has changed how people communicate, exchange information and interact with contents and each other. People can now connect and take part in a variety of social activities with friends, family, and strangers online.

Globally, this has changed how people engage and communicate with one another. A large number of features and functionalities offered by social media platforms enable diverse types of communication, such as text messages, photographs, videos, and live streaming (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2019). According to Pew Research Center reports in 2019, social media use, is nearly universal among teens and young adults between the ages of 13 to 18-year-olds, and these teens and young adults use at least one out of the seven major online platforms, spending about nine hours each day on one or more of the platforms.

Social media is an ever-changing, growing phenomenon since its inception. Social media is software designed primarily to facilitate social interaction. Social media developers have sought to draw more individuals online through various media formats. Essentially, social media is one of the most captivating and accessible ways to keep in touch and communicate with other individuals. In July 2012, the number of individuals using social media had risen 5 percent, to about 172 million people. And it can be assumed that those numbers have only continued to rise. However, with the increased use of social media, the mental health of participating individuals has seen an increase in research interest.

In 2018, a study focused on finding the relationship between social media use and depression and anxiety (Shensa, Sidani, Dew, Escobar-Viera, & Primack 2018). After conducting a cluster analysis, these authors concluded individuals that use social media report higher levels of both depression and anxiety. Higher levels of depression and anxiety were not common for those with limited social media use. There was an earlier study conducted out of this lab among young adults in the United States looking to identify an association between the number of social media platforms used with depression and anxiety (Primack Shensa, Escobar-Viera, Barrett, Sidani, Colditz, & James, 2017). The researchers concluded participants who used seven or more social media platforms reported elevated levels of depression and anxiety.

A study by Lin, Sidani, Shensa, Radovic, Miller, Colditz, Hoffman, Giles, & Primack (2016) also focused on young adults and the association between depression and social media use. It revealed that participants who used social media frequently showed more symptoms of depression as opposed to those who reported limited social media use. A separate study, focusing on young adults and a social media use connection to depression, reported similar findings but reached a slightly different conclusion (Shensa et al., 2017). Social media was said

to be associated with depressive symptoms among individuals; however, the identified association was based on how social media was used instead of how long it was used.

Other authors have suggested specific reasons as to why social media is associated with depression and anxiety. Considering age and its connection with social media and the impact on self-esteem, studies by Andreassen, Pallesen and Griffiths (2017), and Hardy and Castonguay (2018) are particularly relevant. The study focused on the relationship between addictive social media use, narcissism, and self-esteem. Findings were broken down by gender and age. Regarding both factors, it was reported women had higher scores of addictive social media use than men, but it was also more common among young adults than it was with older adults, ages 61-88 (Andreassen et al., 2017). Addictive social media use was positively linked to narcissism but negatively linked to self-esteem among younger adults, age 16-30. In 2018, there was an analysis of the 2016 General Social Survey, specifically looking at the role of age in the relationship between social media and well-being (young versus middle/older adults). Hardy and Castonguay (2018) concluded there was a strong relationship between social media use and anxiety; however, this relationship depended on the age of individuals; as it appeared in middle/older adults (ages 46-60), but not in young adults.

An analysis published in 2017 took a different approach when looking at the connection between social media and well-being. The authors state that social media can have either a negative or positive impact depending on the way that it is used (Clark, Algoe & Green, 2017). Positive associations between well-being and social media use are commonly linked to increased connection, whereas negative associations are frequently linked to behaviors that do not meet users' needs for acceptance. In a recent study published in 2020, researchers specifically looked to compare student health, well-being, and social media use (Wright Schaeffer, Mullins, Evans & Cast, 2020). In order to look at this comparison, Wright and colleagues looked at the different impact social networking sites have. The study was survey-based with a total of 630 undergraduate participants. It was concluded that increased time spent daily on certain social networking sites were generally associated with more negative outcomes. It was also reported that video-based and professional platforms were related to an increase in well-being, while image-based and text-based platforms were not.

Facebook: Facebook is one of the three social media platforms the current study included in data collection. Founder Mark Zuckerberg established this platform in February 2004. Facebook was one of the first platforms in the ongoing era of social media. Many individuals today use it, including individuals from both the Millennial generation and Generation Z. Since Facebook is one of the first platforms to gain popularity, there has been research on its impact on depression, anxiety, and psychological well-being (Brailovskaia, Schillack, & Margraf, 2020; Hanna et al., 2017).

In 2020, there was a study specifically focusing on young adults in Germany. The study aimed to identify the relationship between reasons for social media use, daily stress, depression, and anxiety. The study concluded that social interaction, self-presentation, information seeking, relaxation, entertainment, as well as others were the reasons for using social media (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). However, the results were inconclusive in determining the relationship between social media use, depression, anxiety, and daily stress. Another study focused on finding the relationship between reasoning for the use of social media and psychological well-being among young adults. The study explicitly focused on self-objectification and social comparison in terms of the reasoning individuals have to use social media. It was concluded that social comparison and self-objectification mediate the relationship between Facebook use and psychological well-being (Hanna et al., 2017). Social comparison and self-objectification tend to be the primary reasons as to why social media use occurs among young adults.

A study in 2016, targeted the relationship between self-esteem, social comparison, and Facebook use. The study utilised a survey-based methodology that focused on 267 undergraduate students in ages ranging from 18 to 51. The authors found self-esteem did not necessarily have a connection to social comparison in Facebook use, however, individuals with lower self-esteem indicated a perceived increase in Facebook use that was not actually indicated (Cramer et al., 2016). Another study published in that same year looked at a theory that suggested that well-being is negatively impacted by Facebook use (Tromholt, 2016). In order to find the true relationship between well-being and Facebook use, Tromholt conducted a week-long study with 1,095 participants with an average age of 34 years. Participants took an initial questionnaire before being assigned to one of two groups: do not

use Facebook for a week or continue to use Facebook regularly. The study was able to provide causal evidence that quitting Facebook leads to an increase in both cognitive and affective well-being (Trombolt, 2016). Taking a break from the platform allowed users to report a greater overall satisfaction in their lives.

Instagram: Instagram is the second social media platform this study intends to include in the data collected. Founder Mark Zuckerberg established it in October 2010. Mark Zuckerberg established Instagram as a branch of Facebook. It is a social platform used to share photos of individuals' lives. Like Facebook, it is prevalent, primarily because of its simplicity. Since Instagram is still one of the newer social media platforms, there is limited research regarding its impact on the relationship between Instagram use and mental health.

In 2016, a study was conducted specifically focusing on the connection between Instagram use, loneliness, and social comparison. Many previous studies have looked at the connection between social media use and loneliness before, but the results have been inconclusive. The study was survey-based and focused on 208 undergraduate participants between the ages of 18 and 25. It was concluded that browsing on Instagram was related to lower levels of loneliness, but broadcasting, which is what influencers engage in, was related to higher levels of loneliness (Yang, 2016). It was also found that users that engaged in upward social comparison reported higher levels of loneliness. Another study published in 2016 also focused on the relationship between social media use and loneliness, while considering specific platforms: Instagram and Twitter. Researchers hypothesized that picture-based platforms create more of a social presence allowing them to better combat loneliness compared to text-based platforms (Pittman & Reich, 2016). The study utilized a mixed-method survey design focusing on 253 undergraduate participants. It was concluded that using more image-based platforms, like Instagram, is associated with lower levels of loneliness.

In 2017 there was a study conducted that specifically focused on the types of Instagram use and its relationship with depressed moods among adolescents. This longitudinal study was conducted to fill gaps that had not yet been addressed in previous research. The study consisted of self-report surveys after each use of Instagram. Participants were instructed to use Instagram twice a day and to fill out the survey after each use. The findings from this study suggest individuals that used Instagram the first time in the day were more depressed than when they

used it the second time. A recently conducted study focused on the possible benefits of Instagram use on psychological well-being among adolescents. The study utilized an interview basis among adolescents to identify possible connections between the use of the platform and well-being (Cipolletta, Malighetti, Cenedese, & Spoto, 2020). It was found after adolescents had received likes on posted photos, there was an increase in personal self-acceptance. In the case of receiving likes and increased psychological well-being, self-esteem and self-image tend to increase with more social recognition. However, according to these authors, as quickly as self-acceptance can increase, it can also decrease when posts on Instagram lack the amount of desired ‘likes.’

Twitter: Twitter is the third social media platform this study to be considered. Founder Jack Dorsey established twitter in March 2006. Twitter is a social platform that combines characteristics of both Instagram and Facebook. Although Twitter was launched before Instagram, it does not have the same popularity among both the Millennia generation and Generation Z. It is more commonly used by individuals between the ages of 18 and 23 and is starting to gain more popularity across the age span. Due to this, there has been limited research conducted on the relationship between social media and user mental health.

A study published in 2015 looked to find the differences in personality among users that use both Twitter and Facebook and users that only use Facebook. Petrocchi (2015) hypothesized that Facebook only users would positively correlate with feelings of loneliness, whereas users of both platforms would have no significant correlation with loneliness. The study was survey-based and focused in 214 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 23 years old. The conclusion was supported by the hypothesis, for Facebook only users, who reported more hours of usage on the one platform for higher levels of loneliness than users of both Twitter and Facebook.

In 2016 a study was conducted with the intention to identify a relationship between life satisfaction, happiness, and Twitter use. The study specifically aimed to see if life satisfaction could be interrupted by outlying societal factors such as politics, disasters, etc. (Yang & Srinivasan, 2016). The study utilized a surveillance methodology where researchers observed tweets that were posted. It was found that expression of life satisfaction were immune to current events (political, disasters, etc.) and showed few random fluctuations. A study

conducted in 2018 by Brailovskaia and Margraf looking at German students and the impact social media has on mental health, the researchers used survey methodology. The findings led the authors to conclude Twitter is associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. The research findings may be due to the nature of the platform. Twitter is not considered as interactive as other social media platforms, making it more difficult for individuals to improve mental health status (Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2018).

However, a separate study reached the opposite conclusion. A longitudinal study focused on the relationship between Twitter and depression. It was found that individuals who indicated low in-person social support and used Twitter had reduced symptoms of depression (Cole, Nick, Varga, Smith, Zelkowitz, Ford, & Lédeczi, 2018). Twitter is a platform that many individuals use to relate to others. Because the platform is used in this manner, many individuals find support online rather than in person. These findings suggest that individuals that conveyed positive sentiment through the platform also showed reduced symptoms of depression.

The Nexus between Social Media and Metal Health

Social media can have both positive and negative impact on university students' mental health. Research has shown that social media has so many advantages to various category of users. Among the various users include university students who can gain from the numerous advantages that social media offers from its usage. Some of such advantages include:

Social media and connectivity provision: Social media and technology offer the world greater convenience in connectivity. Many students are away from family and friends for the first time when they are enrolled into the university. Social media provides opportunity for students to connect to their families and friends as they are important to them. Similarly, social media can offer a sense of belonging and connection for students who find it difficult to form relationships on campus.

Access to resources: Social media can provide access to mental health resources, support groups, and therapy sessions (Phillips, 2020).

Self-expression and creativity: Social media can be a platform for self-expression and creativity, which can be beneficial to mental health service users.

Stress relief: Social media can provide stress relief for students which can serve as a healthy distraction from academic stress and anxiety for them. **Support network:** Social media can provide students with support networks and online friendships with people outside their physical reach (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020).

Coping Skills: Research have shown that social media can provide students with coping skills and strategies for managing mental health, as they are able to get tips on coping skills from the internet, if the need arises (Demirtepe-Saygili, 2020).

Academic support and resources: According to Hirschfeld (2018) social media can provide students with academic support and resources that will help to reduce the students' academic stress.

Communication process: It has been observed that social media can offer students a means to communicate their emotions and feelings with people online, even with strangers. This provides emotional expression support (Gao, Jia, Zhao & Zhang, 2019).

Counselling services: University students can access counselling services, and therapy sessions from social media (Stoll, Ziegele & Quiring, 2020).

Challenges with Social Media for Mental Health

The science on the role of social media for engaging persons with mental disorders needs a cautionary note on the effects of social media usage on mental health and wellbeing, particularly in adolescents and young adults. While the risks and harms of social media are frequently covered in the popular press and mainstream news reports, careful consideration of the research in this area is necessary. In a review of 43 studies in young people, many benefits of social media were cited, including increased self-esteem, and opportunities for self-disclosure. Yet, reported negative effects were an increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depressive symptoms and bullying. There are three major categories of risk related to use of social media and mental health. These include: impact on symptoms; facing hostile interactions; and consequences for daily life.

Impact on Symptoms: Studies consistently highlight that use of social media, especially heavy use and prolonged time spent on social media platforms, appears to contribute to increased risk for a variety of mental health symptoms and poor wellbeing, especially among young people (Andreassen et al., 2016; Woods & Scott, 2016). This may partly be driven by the detrimental effects of screen time on mental health, including increased severity of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which have been well documented (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). Recent studies have reported negative effects of social media use on mental health of young people, including social comparison pressure with others and greater feeling of social isolation after being rejected by others on social media (Rideout & Fox, 2018).

In a study of young adults, it was found that negative comparisons with others on Facebook contributed to risk of rumination and subsequent increases in depression symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2013). Still, the cross sectional nature of many screen time and mental health studies makes it challenging to reach causal inferences (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Quantity of social media use is also an important factor, as highlighted in a survey of young adults ages 19 to 32, where more frequent visits

to social media platforms each week were correlated with greater depressive symptoms. More time spent using social media is also associated with greater symptoms of anxiety (Vannucci, Flannery, & Ohannessian, 2017).

The actual number of platforms accessed also appears to contribute to risk as reflected in another national survey of young adults where use of a large number of social media platforms was associated with negative impact on mental health. Among survey respondents using between 7 and 11 different social media platforms compared to respondents using only 2 or fewer platforms, there was a 3 times greater odds of having high levels of depressive symptoms and a 3.2 times greater odds of having high levels of anxiety symptoms (Primack et al., 2017). Many researchers have postulated that worsening mental health attributed to social media use may be because social media replaces face-to-face interactions for young people, and may contribute to greater loneliness, and negative effects on other aspects of health and wellbeing (Bucci et al., 2019).

For individuals living with more severe mental illnesses, the effects of social media on psychiatric symptoms have received less attention. One study found that participation in chat rooms may contribute to worsening symptoms in young people with psychotic disorders, while another study of patients with psychosis found that social media use appeared to predict low mood (Berry, Emsley, Lobban, & Bucci, 2018). These studies highlight a clear relationship between social media use and mental health that may not be present in general population studies (Orben & Przybylski, 2019), and emphasize the need to explore how social media may contribute to symptom severity and whether protective factors may be identified to mitigate these risks.

Facing Hostile Interactions: Popular social media platforms can create potential situations where individuals may be victimised by negative comments or posts. Cyber bullying represents a form of online aggression directed towards specific individuals, such as peers or acquaintances, which is perceived to be most harmful when compared to random hostile comments posted online. Importantly, cyber bullying on social media consistently shows harmful impact on mental health in the form of increased depressive symptoms as well as worsening of anxiety symptoms, as evidenced in a review of 36 studies among children and young people (Hamm et al., 2015).

Furthermore, cyber bullying disproportionately impacts females as reflected in a national survey of adolescents in the United States, where females were twice as likely to be victims of cyber bullying compared to males (Alhajji, Bass & Dai, 2019). Most studies report cross-sectional associations between cyber bullying and symptoms of depression or anxiety, though one longitudinal study in Switzerland found that cyber bullying contributed to significantly greater depression over time. For youths aged 10 to 17 who reported major depressive symptomatology, there was over three times

greater odds of facing online harassment in the last year compared to youth who reported mild or no depressive symptoms.

Similarly, in a 2018 national survey of young people, respondents aged 14 to 22 with moderate to severe depressive symptoms were more likely to have had negative experiences when using social media, and in particular, were more likely to report having faced hostile comments, or being “trolled”, from others when compared to respondents without depressive symptoms (31% vs. 14%) (Rideout & Fox, 2018). As these studies depict risks for victimization on social media and the correlation with poor mental health, it is possible that individuals living with mental illness will also experience greater hostility online compared to individuals without mental illness. This would be consistent with research showing greater risk of hostility, including increased violence and discrimination, directed towards individuals living with mental illness in in-person contexts, especially targeted at those with severe mental illnesses.

A computational study of mental health awareness campaigns on Twitter reported that while stigmatising content was rare, it was actually the most spread (re-tweeted) demonstrating that harmful content can travel quickly on social media (Saha et al., 2019). Another study was able to map the spread of social media posts about the Blue Whale Challenge, an alleged game promoting suicide, over Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr and other forums across 127 countries (Sumner et al., 2019). These findings show that it is critical to monitor the actual content of social media posts, such as determining whether content is hostile or promotes harm to self or others. This is pertinent because existing research looking at duration of exposure cannot account for the impact of specific types of content on mental health and is insufficient to fully understand the effects of using these platforms on mental health.

Consequences for Daily Life: The ways in which individuals use social media can also impact their offline relationships and everyday activities. To date, reports have described risks of social media use pertaining to privacy, confidentiality, and unintended consequences of disclosing personal health information online (Torous & Keshavan, 2016). Additionally, concerns have been raised about poor quality or misleading health information shared on social media, and that social media users may not be aware of misleading information or conflicts of interest especially when the platforms promote popular content regardless of whether it is from a trustworthy source. For persons living with mental illness there may be additional risks from using social media.

A recent study that specifically explored the perspectives of social media users with serious mental illnesses, including participants with schizophrenia spectrum disorders, bipolar disorder, or major depression, found that over one third of participants expressed concerns about privacy when using social media. The reported risks of social media use were directly related to many aspects of

everyday life, including concerns about threats to employment, fear of stigma and being judged, impact on personal relationships, and facing hostility or being hurt (Naslund & Aschbrenner, 2019). While few studies have specifically explored the dangers of social media use from the perspectives of individuals living with mental illness, it is important to recognize that use of these platforms may contribute to risks that are extend beyond worsening symptoms and that can affect different aspects of daily life.

3.0 Methodology

The researcher adopted survey research methodology in the study. The choice of adopting survey research in this study was not only due to its appropriateness, but also due to its inherent advantages ranging from its usage to probe problems in their natural settings, enabling the collection of expansive data convenience of its application to the availability of relatively more data under this method than in other cases. The population of study was drawn from youths in Enugu State. Youths in Enugu State have a population of 1,078,287, according to the population projection of the National Population Commission.

The population of study therefore is 1,078,287. The sample of this study was 373 derived from the population using the Australian sample size calculator. Multistage sampling technique was adopted in this study. Using this technique, the researcher divided the population into strata at various stages for better data collection, management, and interpretation. Consequently, Enugu state was divided into seventeen (17) clusters using the 17 LGAs. Residents of these LGAs were selected as the respondents of the study. Questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument in this study. Direct and face to face approach were used to collect data on this studying using the 373 copies of questionnaire.

The questionnaire was validated by three experts in Mass Communication. For test of reliability of the test instrument, forty (40) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents in Enugu urban area for a pilot study. The data in this study were analysed using descriptive statistics.

4.0 Data Analysis

Research Question One

What is the duration of time spent on social media platforms by youths in Enugu State?

Table 1. Duration of Time Spent on Social Media Platforms		
Time Spent per Day	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	40	11.1
1–2 hours	110	30.6
3–4 hours	120	33.4

5 hours and above	89	24.8
Total	359	100

The table indicates that most youths in Enugu State (33.4%) spend 3–4 hours daily on social media; 24.8% exceed 5 hours, indicating frequent usage.

Research Question Two

Does the amount of time spent on social media contribute to the levels of anxiety among youths in Enugu State?

Table 2. Social Media Usage and Anxiety Levels

Level of Anxiety	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	70	19.5
Moderate	150	41.8
High	139	38.7
Total	359	100

In the analysis, 41.8% of students experience moderate anxiety, while 38.7% experience high anxiety, suggesting a strong link with social media usage.

Research Question Three

What is the extent to which exposure to the social media leads to mental breakdown among youths in Enugu State?

Table 3. Exposure to Social Media and Mental Breakdown

Extent of Exposure	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	60	16.7
Moderate	145	40.4
High	154	42.9
Total	359	100

The table shows that there is high exposure to social media with 42.9% of youths in Enugu State reporting high exposure, suggesting that frequent exposure may contribute to mental breakdowns.

Research Question Four

Does regular exposure to the social media contribute to depression tendencies among youths in Enugu State?

Table 4. Social Media and Depression Tendencies

Level of Depression	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	80	22.3
Moderate	140	39.0
High	139	38.7
Total	359	100

The table indicates that nearly 78% of youths in Enugu State show moderate to high depression tendencies linked to social media usage, highlighting potential mental health concerns.

4.1 Discussion of Results

The data shows that 33.4% of youths in Enugu State spend 3–4 hours daily on social media, while 24.8% exceed 5 hours. Only 11.1% spend less than 1 hour. This indicates that youths in Enugu State are frequent users of social media platforms. This finding aligns with studies by Kuss and Griffiths (2015), who reported that young adults often spend multiple hours per day on social media, which can affect time management and productivity. Similarly, Andreassen et al. (2017) found that university students frequently engage in social media for social interaction, entertainment, and information-seeking, often exceeding 3 hours daily. The implication is that the prolonged duration of social media usage among students may increase the likelihood of negative psychological outcomes, as excessive use has been linked to mental strain and reduced academic focus.

Analysis also reveals that 41.8% of youths experience moderate anxiety, while 38.7% experience high anxiety associated with social media usage. Only 19.5% report low anxiety levels. This suggests a strong correlation between time spent on social media and anxiety levels among youths. This findings aligns with Vannucci et al. (2017, who found that higher social media engagement is positively associated with anxiety, stress, and sleep disturbances among college students. Additionally, Primack et al. (2017) reported that individuals who spend more than two hours per day on social media are more likely to report symptoms of anxiety and emotional distress. This means that moderate to high social media usage may predispose youths to anxiety, emphasising the need for awareness programs and self-regulation strategies.

The results show 42.9% of youths report high exposure to social media, while 40.4% report moderate exposure. Only 16.7% report low exposure. This suggests that a significant portion of students are heavily exposed, and this could contribute to psychological strain or mental breakdowns. This is supported by the findings of Twenge et al. (2018), who observed that excessive social media exposure among adolescents and young adults is linked to emotional instability, mental fatigue, and increased vulnerability to stress-related mental health problems. This implies that high exposure necessitates interventions to manage screen time and reduce the risk of mental breakdowns among youths in Enugu State.

Data indicates that nearly 78% of youths show moderate to high depression tendencies, with high exposure likely exacerbating these tendencies. This aligns with previous research, such as Lin et al. (2016), which demonstrated a positive relationship between time spent on social media and depressive symptoms among university students. Shensa et al. (2018) also found that frequent social media use correlates with higher depression scores, particularly in students with low offline social interaction. The import is that persistent exposure to social media may significantly contribute to depression tendencies, highlighting the importance of monitoring usage and promoting mental well-being.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that sustained exposure to social media platforms has a profound and multifaceted impact on the mental health of youths in Enugu State. The results show that a significant number of youths spend considerable time daily on social media, with the majority using these platforms for between three to five hours per day. This level of engagement suggests that social media has become a dominant part of the lives of youths. However, while social media provides opportunities for communication, learning, and entertainment, its excessive and unregulated use poses

serious risks to mental health and psychological well-being. Prolonged social media exposure is closely associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and mental strain among youths. The high rate of exposure to social media correlates with symptoms of mental breakdown such as emotional exhaustion, irritability, and reduced concentration. Social media affects not only emotional well-being but also academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and sleep quality. The study emphasises the need for balance and digital discipline among youths. Social media usage should be moderated to ensure it serves as a tool for learning, communication, and networking rather than a source of psychological harm. This study concludes that the impact of sustained social media exposure on the mental health of youths is significantly negative, particularly in the areas of anxiety, depression, and overall psychological stability.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. There should be continuous effort toward digital literacy and social media management programmes geared toward enlightening youths on the healthy use of digital platforms.
- ii. Youths should be constantly informed, through workshops, seminars and similar programmes, about the effects of social media on their emotional well-being, attention span, and interpersonal relationships.
- iii. Organisations of all kinds where youths are found should strengthen their counseling and provide confidential support to youths showing signs of stress, anxiety, or depression as to help reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviour.
- iv. To balance digital life with physical engagement, education organisations should create the environment, provide facilities and encourage youths to participate in sports, creative arts, debates, and community service activities as to provide them with opportunities for real-world socialisation and emotional resilience, reducing the over-dependence on social media for validation and connection.

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