



The Double-Edged Sword of Social Media: An Examination of the Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This study investigates the dual impact of social media on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa, addressing both its beneficial and detrimental effects. A systematic literature review was conducted to explore the complex relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes in the region. The review encompassed a comprehensive search of relevant scholarly databases, focusing on studies published between 2018 and 2023. Selected sources underwent rigorous coding and thematic analysis to identify key trends and arguments. The findings reveal that social media can enhance social connectivity and increase awareness of mental health issues while also contributing to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem, particularly among victims of cyberbullying. The study underscores the necessity of a multifaceted approach to combat cyberbullying, including awareness-raising, educational resources, and robust regulations governing online behaviour. Limitations of the study include potential biases in the available literature and constraints regarding access to non-public research. Nonetheless, the insights gained are vital for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders aiming to foster positive mental health outcomes. The study highlights the urgent need for collaborative efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of social media on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa, advocating for proactive measures to create a safer and more supportive online environment for all users.

Introduction

The social media landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa has undergone significant changes over the past decade, influencing mental health outcomes in the region (Banjoko, 2021). As internet penetration has increased, surpassing 50% in various countries by mid-2022 (Internet World Stats, 2022), more people in Sub-Saharan Africa are gaining access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Deumert et al., 2019; Akinwotu, 2021). This surge in connectivity has mixed effects on mental health due to the diverse information and interactions that individuals encounter, which can influence their overall well-being (Mbiti & Weil, 2016).

A notable trend in the advancement of social media in Sub-Saharan Africa is the growth of mobile technology. The Global Systems for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA, 2021) reports that mobile technology has become the region's primary means of internet access, with over 300 million unique mobile subscribers as of 2020. The accessibility of smartphones and reasonably priced data



plans enables more people in the region to use social media platforms while on the move (Tambo & Nguetse, 2022). This shift has transformed online communication, emphasising instant messaging and multimedia content (Chimombo & Chirwa, 2020). Nonetheless, while this enhanced connectivity can foster a sense of community and support, it may also lead to feelings of isolation and reliance on digital interactions for social connections (Banejee & Singh, 2020; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Another crucial factor in the evolution of social media in Sub-Saharan Africa is the increase in local content and platforms. The growing number of individuals accessing social media has stimulated demand for content that reflects their cultural backgrounds and experiences (Nopanye, 2021). This demand has led to creating platforms specifically designed for African audiences, which facilitate sharing personal stories, foster connections, and engage in discussions pertinent to their lives. However, the spread of misinformation and fake news on these platforms can adversely affect mental health, exposing individuals to harmful or misleading content that may lead to anxiety, stress, and confusion (Dedeoglu, 2020).

Moreover, the influence of social media on mental health outcomes varies between urban and rural regions in Sub-Saharan Africa. In urban areas, where internet connectivity is more common and smartphone ownership is higher, social media usage is often more intense and widespread (Egunjobi & Fawole, 2020). This increased use can contribute to higher instances of social media addiction and cyberbullying, as individuals may spend excessive time online and experience a more significant number of negative interactions (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Conversely, individuals in rural areas, where internet access is limited and social media usage is lower, may struggle with loneliness and isolation due to insufficient online connectivity (Beke, 2022).

Overall, the development of social media in Sub-Saharan Africa presents a complex array of impacts on mental health outcomes within the region. While it serves as a significant tool for fostering connections, raising awareness about mental health issues, and offering support, social media can also exacerbate feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Gonzalez et al., 2021). For researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the general public seeking to understand the repercussions of social media on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is imperative to investigate these dynamics further and develop strategies that promote positive mental health outcomes in the digital era.

Methodology

This study employed a rigorous systematic literature review to explore the impact of social media on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa. The review aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes, particularly in the context of depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, and social media addiction. The objective was to synthesise existing research findings to illuminate both the positive and negative ramifications of social media on mental well-being in the region.

The systematic review involved meticulous searches of key scholarly databases utilising strategic keyword combinations relevant to the investigated themes. Key terms included "social media," "mental health," "Sub-Saharan Africa," "depression," "anxiety," "cyberbullying," "addiction," "self-esteem," and "community support." This extensive search spanned databases related to psychology, sociology, health sciences, and African studies.

The sampling frame was confined to five years, from 2018 to 2023, to ensure the inclusion of the most recent studies examining the dynamics of social media concerning mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa. The source screening process applied strict inclusion criteria to filter for relevance. To be considered, each source had to provide substantial analysis of the implications of social media on



mental health and offer empirical data or theoretical insights into the ongoing discourse. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journals, articles, and reputable institutional reports.

The review also considered the contextual factors influencing these dynamics, such as socio-cultural attitudes towards mental health, urban versus rural disparities in social media usage, and the role of community support systems. The coding process accounted for the complexities of social media interactions, distinguishing between various forms of engagement (e.g., passive scrolling versus active participation) and their associated mental health effects.

The final sample included 30 sources, comprising peer-reviewed studies, analytical reports, and credible news articles. This deliberate sampling strategy allowed for triangulation across diverse perspectives—scholarly analysis, clinical evaluations, and media reporting—enhancing the robustness of the conclusions drawn.

The selected sources underwent systematic coding and thematic analysis to identify key trends, positions, and arguments. The coding categorised the sources by type, methodology, principal findings, evidence basis, and assessments of social media's influence on mental health variables. This coding process enabled synthesis across the sample to identify areas of consensus and contentious debates within the literature regarding social media's effects.

By aggregating this coded data, the review formulated a coherent framework articulating the interplay between social media engagement and mental health outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Triangulated insights from various authors mitigated single-perspective biases and bolstered the study's rigour. While the methodological strengths lay in the comprehensive assessment of multifaceted empirical studies, limitations included potential biases in published research and access constraints due to non-public-focused papers.

Findings and Discussion

Cyberbullying and Mental Health in Sub-Saharan Africa

Cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly pressing issue in Sub-Saharan Africa, coinciding with the region's growing usage of the internet and social media. Researchers, policymakers, practitioners, industry experts, and the general public need to understand how cyberbullying affects mental health to tackle this challenge effectively. Cyberbullying entails the use of electronic communication to bully or harass individuals, often through social media platforms. This behaviour can have severe consequences for the mental health and well-being of individuals, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where mental health resources may be limited (Oduor et al., 2020).

Studies have indicated that victims of cyberbullying are more likely to experience a range of adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Kwan et al., 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where stigma surrounding mental health is prevalent and resources are scarce, the effects of cyberbullying can be even more damaging. Those targeted may suffer from feelings of isolation, shame, and fear, which could exacerbate existing mental health conditions or contribute to new issues (Suleiman et al., 2022). It is crucial for stakeholders in the region to recognise the impact of cyberbullying on mental health outcomes and to implement education, prevention, and support measures.

A significant challenge in addressing cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of comprehensive information regarding its prevalence and impact. Limited research has been conducted on the phenomenon in this region, making it challenging to comprehend the problem's extent and formulate effective interventions (Oduor et al., 2020). Furthermore, cultural factors and societal norms may influence the perception and management of cyberbullying across different



communities (Wathen et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers and policymakers need to prioritise cyberbullying studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and collaborate with local communities to better understand the issue (Hoadley, 2021).

To effectively address cyberbullying and its repercussions on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa, a multifaceted approach is required. This includes raising awareness about cyberbullying, providing educational resources for prevention and intervention, and encouraging positive online behaviours (Makuwa et al., 2023). Additionally, mental health support services should be more accessible to those affected by cyberbullying, assisting them in managing the emotional and psychological repercussions of such experiences (Suleiman et al., 2022). By recognising the seriousness of cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa and taking proactive steps to address it, we can strive towards creating a safer and more supportive online environment for everyone in the region.

The impact of cyberbullying on mental health

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue in the digital era, affecting individuals of all ages worldwide. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the mental health consequences of cyberbullying are particularly severe, given the rapid increase in internet and social media usage (Oduor et al., 2020). Research indicates that individuals who experience cyberbullying are at a greater risk of developing mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Nkansah et al., 2022).

One significant way that cyberbullying impacts mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa is by perpetuating feelings of isolation and loneliness. Victims often describe feelings of ostracism and disconnection from peers, leading to a profound sense of loneliness that negatively affects their mental well-being (Suleiman et al., 2022). Additionally, ongoing exposure to negative messages and bullying can significantly decrease individuals' self-esteem and confidence, worsening feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness (Makuwa et al., 2023). Moreover, cyberbullying can contribute to the emergence of anxiety disorders, as the fear of being targeted or humiliated online can heighten stress and anxiety levels, affecting everyday functioning (Yusuf, 2021). Living in a constant state of fear can have long-lasting effects on mental health, possibly resulting in more severe anxiety disorders if not addressed (Wathen & Harris, 2016). Alongside anxiety and loneliness, cyberbullying has also been correlated with an increased likelihood of depression. The detrimental impact of cyberbullying on self-esteem and overall mental health can cultivate feelings of hopelessness and despair, further entrenching the cycle of cognitive decline (Cilliers & Smit, 2019).

Strategies for addressing cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa

To tackle the widespread issue of cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa effectively, a holistic approach that brings together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, industry professionals, and the general public is essential. Defined as the use of electronic communications to intimidate, harass, or harm others, cyberbullying carries profound mental health implications for the region (Oduor et al., 2020). It is crucial to design strategies that take account of the unique socio-cultural landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa (Makuwa et al., 2023).

One effective strategy for combating cyberbullying involves implementing extensive educational and awareness campaigns. By increasing knowledge about the harmful effects of cyberbullying and promoting responsible online behaviour, individuals can be empowered to identify and report incidents (Nkansah et al., 2022). Educational programmes can also help cultivate a culture of digital citizenship, reducing the prevalence of cyberbullying in the region (Hoadley, 2021). Another critical approach is to establish clear regulations and policies governing online behaviour. By creating laws that address cyberbullying and hold perpetrators accountable, policymakers can contribute to a safer online environment (Yusuf, 2021). Collaboration among governmental agencies, tech companies, and



civil society organisations is essential to ensure the effective enforcement of such regulations and to provide necessary support services for victims of cyberbullying (Suleiman et al., 2022).

Additionally, promoting mental health awareness and accessible support services is crucial for addressing the mental health effects of cyberbullying in Sub-Saharan Africa. Providing convenient access to mental health resources, including counselling and support groups, can help victims cope with the psychological consequences of abuse (Cilliers & Smit, 2019). Furthermore, incorporating mental health education into school curricula and community programmes can help to de-stigmatise mental health issues and encourage early intervention for those experiencing distress related to cyberbullying (Wathen & Harris, 2016).

Social Media Addiction and its Effects on Mental Health in Sub-Saharan Africa

The rise of social media addiction has become increasingly problematic in Sub-Saharan Africa, with more individuals dedicating substantial time to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This addiction can adversely affect mental health, contributing to conditions such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness (Nwankwo & Obinna, 2021). Studies indicate that excessive social media use disrupts sleep patterns, elevates stress levels, and negatively impacts self-esteem and confidence (Ogunyemi et al., 2022).

A significant factor in the way social media addiction influences mental health is the continual comparison individuals make with others. Many users present an idealised version of their lives online, which can evoke feelings of inadequacy and diminished self-worth among those frequently encountering such curated images (Balogun et al., 2023). This phenomenon can lead to heightened anxiety and depression as users struggle to meet unrealistic standards set by others (Odukoya & Aboh, 2020). Furthermore, cyberbullying, which can arise from social media addiction, poses a serious risk, particularly for younger individuals. The anonymity afforded by online platforms enables some users to engage in harmful behaviours, resulting in emotional distress and lasting psychological effects (Adeyemi et al., 2021). These effects can undermine self-esteem, confidence, and overall mental health (Wang & Wang, 2021).

In both urban and rural contexts within Sub-Saharan Africa, trends in social media addiction are on the rise, yet the resulting mental health outcomes differ. Urban areas generally provide better access to technology and exhibit higher social media engagement rates; however, rural regions are also experiencing the negative consequences of increased screen time (Chigwada et al., 2022). Researchers, policymakers, and mental health practitioners need to recognise these differences to create effective support systems for individuals facing challenges related to social media addiction. Despite its negative aspects, social media can also serve as a tool for promoting mental health awareness and support in Sub-Saharan Africa. By encouraging constructive online interactions, fostering community connections, and offering credible mental health information, social media can help dismantle stigmas and extend vital support to those in need (Okwor, 2023). Collaboration among all stakeholders is crucial to harnessing the positive features of social media while minimising its detrimental impacts on mental health.

Social media and its connection to depression and anxiety in Sub-Saharan Africa

Social media has become an integral part of daily life for many in Sub-Saharan Africa, serving as a platform for communication, networking, and information sharing. However, the increasing use of these platforms has raised concerns about their potential effects on mental health, particularly concerning depression and anxiety. Research indicates a strong correlation between social media use and depression, with studies noting that excessive engagement in social media can lead to feelings of loneliness, diminished self-esteem, and heightened social comparison (Keles et al., 2020; Primack et al., 2017).



A significant factor linking social media and depression is social comparison. Users frequently showcase idealised versions of their lives on social media, which can foster feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among those who don't measure up to these perceived standards (Vogel et al., 2014). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where cultural values may strongly emphasise social status and success, the impact of such comparisons can be particularly acute (Baker & Oswald, 2010). Furthermore, cyberbullying has emerged as a critical issue affecting mental health in this region. The anonymity afforded by social media can facilitate the spread of harmful messages, exacerbating feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression among those targeted (Chib et al., 2022; Tynes, 2015). Studies have shown that individuals who experience cyberbullying are more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms, underscoring the urgent need for increased awareness and intervention strategies to address this growing concern.

Additionally, social media addiction has become a prevalent issue in Sub-Saharan Africa, with many individuals spending excessive amounts of time online, detracting from their overall mental health. Research has identified a correlation between social media addiction and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2016; Männikkö et al., 2018). As social media continues to play a central role in the lives of individuals in the region, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners must acknowledge its potential mental health effects and develop targeted interventions.

Another contributing factor to anxiety induced by social media is the pressure to maintain a perfect online image. Users often feel compelled to present only the favourable aspects of their lives, which can distort their perceptions of reality (Vogel et al., 2014). This distortion can create feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt as individuals compare themselves to the seemingly perfect lives of others. Such persistent comparison can exacerbate anxiety and self-criticism among users in Sub-Saharan Africa (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Moreover, the prevalence of cyberbullying can escalate feelings of anxiety. Victims of online harassment often experience fear, shame, and isolation, which can lead to increased anxiety and stress levels (Chib et al., 2022).

To safeguard mental well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa, stakeholders must address the issue of cyberbullying on social media platforms (Walters, 2020). Additionally, social media addiction can create compulsive behaviours that heighten anxiety, as the constant need to check notifications can interfere with daily life (Andreassen et al., 2016). Users need to establish healthy boundaries to mitigate the risks of addiction and anxiety.

Strategies for addressing depression and anxiety linked to social media use

It is vital to acknowledge the potential detrimental impacts of social media on mental health, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, to tackle the increasingly prevalent issues of depression and anxiety (Keles et al., 2020). Researchers, policymakers, and the public can explore various strategies to mitigate these concerns.

One practical approach is promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills. Educating individuals on differentiating reliable information from misinformation can help them navigate online spaces more effectively, reducing anxiety and stress associated with harmful content (Chou et al., 2020). This knowledge can empower users to make informed decisions regarding their social media consumption and protect their mental well-being.

Encouraging mindfulness and setting boundaries with social media use is another crucial strategy. Research indicates that individuals who are mindful of their social media habits can better manage feelings of anxiety and depression (González-Rosende et al., 2021). By monitoring their time spent on social media and being conscious of the content they engage with, individuals can mitigate their



exposure to material that triggers feelings of anxiety and depression. Establishing limits on screen time before bed and taking regular breaks from social media can also help alleviate feelings of anxiety and depression associated with constant connectivity (González et al., 2020).

Creating supportive online communities is equally important in addressing social media-related depression and anxiety. Providing safe spaces for individuals to share their experiences and seek advice can combat the isolation and loneliness exacerbated by social media engagement (Seabrook et al., 2016). This sense of belonging can enhance mental well-being among users.

Furthermore, promoting mental health resources and awareness on social media can serve as a valuable strategy for tackling depression and anxiety. Social media can effectively connect individuals with the required assistance by disseminating information on mental health services, hotlines, and support groups (Tadesse & Woldemariam, 2021). Encouraging open dialogue about mental health and diminishing the stigma associated with seeking help can lead to a healthier online environment for users in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Additionally, implementing policies and guidelines to regulate social media platforms can play a crucial role in addressing social media-related depression and anxiety. Platforms can work towards creating safer and more responsible online spaces by implementing measures such as removing or labelling harmful content, providing warnings about online harassment, and increasing transparency about algorithm-driven content (Carr et al., 2020).

Ultimately, tackling the growing issues of depression and anxiety in Sub-Saharan Africa will require a multi-faceted approach that involves the cooperation of researchers, policymakers, mental health professionals, and social media platforms (Tadesse & Woldemariam, 2021). By promoting digital literacy, encouraging mindfulness, creating supportive online communities, promoting mental health resources, and implementing policies to regulate social media, we can work towards creating a healthier online environment for the people of Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Role of Misinformation and Fake News on Mental Health in Sub-Saharan Africa

The rise of misinformation on social media has become a pressing issue in Sub-Saharan Africa, with significant implications for mental health. Rapidly disseminating false or misleading content can induce users' confusion, fear, and anxiety (Zarocostas, 2020). Misinformation regarding health, politics, and social issues can exacerbate mental health challenges, leading to increased stress and anxiety for those affected (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). Given the already limited access to reliable information in the region, the spread of misinformation can worsen existing mental health concerns (Khan et al., 2022). Stakeholders must recognise social media's influence in shaping perceptions and actively combat false information proliferation.

The distribution of fake news poses significant risks to mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa. False reports regarding health crises, political instability, or natural disasters can provoke widespread anxiety and a sense of mistrust among the population (Ajanaku et al., 2020). A significant challenge in addressing the adverse effects of misinformation is the relative lack of regulation on social media compared to traditional media, which allows for the rapid spread of unverified information (Agarwal et al., 2020). This environment has been exploited by parties seeking to influence public opinion and create discord, making the fake news issue pervasive and needing a comprehensive solution.

To effectively address the negative impacts of misinformation, it is essential to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public. Educating individuals on identifying credible sources and fact-checking information can help reduce the influence of misinformation on mental health (Chadwick & Dennis, 2020). Collaboration between social media companies, government agencies, and mental health organisations is vital to developing guidelines and protocols for managing



misinformation online (Wang & Vong, 2021). Joint efforts can foster a safer online environment that prioritises the mental health needs of individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Combating Misinformation and Fake News

Establishing partnerships between social media platforms, governmental agencies, civil society organisations, and community leaders is vital for effectively combating misinformation and fake news. Through collaboration, these stakeholders can develop strategies to identify and counter misinformation, encourage accurate reporting, and educate the public on recognising fake news (Wang & Vong, 2021). Incorporating technology-driven solutions, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, can further automate detecting and removing misleading content from social media platforms (Shu et al., 2020).

Enhancing transparency and accountability within digital spaces is also essential for tackling misinformation. Social media platforms must take responsibility for facilitating the spread of false information and implement proactive measures by establishing clear policies for content moderation, fact-checking, and user reporting systems (Meleo-Erwin et al., 2020). By enabling users to verify the authenticity of information shared on these platforms, social media can foster trust while mitigating the adverse effects of misinformation on mental health.

Conclusion

The impact of social media on mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa is multifaceted, and understanding the complex interplay between these factors is crucial for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The region's unique socio-cultural context, coupled with the rapid growth of social media and internet penetration, has created a landscape in which individuals experience both positive and negative effects on their mental well-being. While social media offers numerous benefits, including enhanced social connectivity and increased awareness of mental health issues, it also contributes to adverse outcomes such as elevated rates of depression and anxiety due to social comparison, cyberbullying, addiction, and misinformation.

The findings underscore the dual nature of social media in Sub-Saharan Africa, both as a tool for enhancing community support and mental health awareness while posing significant risks to individual mental well-being. The study highlights the urgent need for stakeholders—including researchers, policymakers, mental health practitioners, and technology experts—to acknowledge the complexities of social media interaction and its varied impact across urban and rural populations. With rising rates of cyberbullying, addiction, and misinformation, there is an increasing necessity for targeted interventions aimed at fostering digital resilience and mental health security among users. The implications of these findings extend to how cognitive health is perceived and managed in a fast-evolving digital landscape, emphasising the importance of developing contextualised strategies that resonate with the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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