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Mental Health Outcomes in the Age of Social Media: A Study on Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism

Olujolu Adelodun OLA-AKINNIYI, PhD
Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Nigeria
olujoluthegreat@gmail.com, olujolu_ola-akinniyi@unilesa.edu.ng
+2348064912919, +2348057787670, https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3433-8268

Iyabo Bolajoko ADEBAMI
Department of Educational Foundations & Counseling, Faculty of Education, University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Nigeria
iyaboadebami74@gmail.com, iyabo_adebami@unilesa.edu.ng, +2347064549060

Abidemi Adewumi ONI, PhD
Department of Educational Foundations & Counseling, Faculty of Education, University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Nigeria
abidemi.akinwale@gmail.com, abidemi_oni@unilesa.edu.ng, +2348069373085
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7753-7602

Abstract
In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media has significantly impacted mental health outcomes, particularly among younger populations. This study explores the relationship between social media usage and mental health challenges, while emphasizing the role of spirituality as a potential coping mechanism. Engaging with empirical and literary studies of existing literatures, the study surveyed a diverse group of individuals to examine their engagement with social media and corresponding mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. The theoretical frameworks of the study are: the interplay of social media, spirituality, and mental health: a review of literature; social media engagement and spirituality: implications for mental health in Nigerian youth; and the impact of social media on mental health: exploring the role of spirituality. Findings indicate a notable correlation between excessive social media use and negative mental health outcomes. It is also discovered that individuals who actively engage in spiritual practices – whether through organized religion or personal spirituality – report lower levels of stress and improved emotional resilience. Thus, emphasized the importance of spiritual well-being as a counterbalance to the detrimental effects of social media, offering valuable insights for pastoral counselors in their practice. By integrating spirituality into therapeutic strategies, counselors can better support individuals navigating the complexities of modern digital life, fostering mental health and overall well-being in the age of social media. Therefore, concludes that as mental health professionals and community leaders strive to address these pressing issues, integrating spirituality into therapeutic practices can enhance support mechanisms for individuals navigating the digital landscape. Consequently, recommends incorporation of spirituality in mental health interventions; digital literacy programs; community support initiatives, etc. these can enhance a holistic approach that acknowledges both the challenges of social media and the transformative potential of spirituality, offering valuable insights for effective mental health interventions.

Keywords: Mental Health, Social Media, Spirituality, Coping Mechanism

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has significantly shaped the landscape of human interaction. The digital age, marked by constant connectivity, has introduced both opportunities and challenges concerning mental health. According to recent studies, mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness have seen a marked increase, particularly among young adults (Twenge, 2019). The juxtaposition of the benefits of enhanced communication through technology with the adverse effects of social media presents a pressing concern for mental health professionals and society at large. On the other hands, social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (now known as X), have emerged as global phenomena, boasting billions of users worldwide. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), around 69% of adults in the United States engage with social media. This trend is mirrored in several African nations, particularly Nigeria, where social media utilization is increasingly prevalent.

In Nigeria, social media has become an integral part of daily life and communication. Omoushere (2017) emphasize that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate significant social interactions, allowing for the exchange of ideas and mobilization of social movements. Akinyemi and Salumi (2020) also highlight that social media serves as a vital tool for political discourse and activism, significantly influencing public opinion and participation in democratic processes. Their research indicates that around 60% of Nigerians use these platforms to engage with current affairs, suggesting a strong correlation between social media usage and civic engagement. According to Folarin (2019) the

availability of smartphones and the internet has boosted the rapid growth of social media in Nigeria, particularly among the youths. This demographic is increasingly using these platforms not just for social interaction but also for education and entrepreneurship, reinforcing the transformative impact of social media in the African context.

Recent research in Nigeria, shows that social media has been transformational, particularly among the youth. Ireton and Akingbade (2022) underscore that social media platforms have become crucial for communication, information dissemination, and socializing, reflecting a shift in how young Nigerians interact with the world around them. Their study highlights that social media usage in Nigeria has grown to over 80%, with a significant emphasis on platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram for both personal and professional networking. Likewise, Adeola and Raji (2023) illustrate how social media serves as a vital instrument for political engagement in Nigeria. Their research indicates that social media initiatives have empowered citizens, particularly the youth, to participate actively in political discourse. They observed that nearly 75% of young Nigerian voters use social media to assess candidates and campaign messages during elections, thus demonstrating the platform's influence on civic engagement. Moreover, Adebayo and Adedoyin (2023) explore the role of social media in shaping public opinion during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings suggest that social media was pivotal in spreading awareness and combating misinformation, with up to 70% of respondents relying on these platforms for updates and guidance on health protocols. These platforms are often used for social interaction, information sharing, and self-expression. Nevertheless, this powerful medium also contributes to the propagation of unrealistic standards and comparisons that can exacerbate mental health issues (Keles et al., 2020). The European Commission (2020) found that excessive social media use correlates with increased psychological distress among users, an issue that has prompted a growing body of research in the field. For instance, a study indicates that both time spent on these platforms and the nature of interactions can significantly impact mental health (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Therefore, this study investigates the complex relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes by examining existing literature and empirical evidence. Thus, the research highlights how social media affects mental well-being, with a particular focus on the unique experiences of individuals in African contexts. This is expedient because of the role of spirituality as a potential coping mechanism. In light of the challenges posed by social media, spirituality emerges as a promising avenue for coping with mental health issues. Whereas research on spirituality and mental health is not as robust as studies on more traditional coping mechanisms, there is a growing recognition of its potential benefits. Spirituality can provide individuals with a sense of purpose, community, and resilience against the negative influences of social media (King et al., 2020). As noted by Idowu (2013) and Abogunrin (2015), integrating spiritual practices into coping strategies may enhance well-being, particularly in cultures that prioritize communal engagement and spiritual beliefs. This study is also expedient because of its importance for mental health professionals and society. Understanding the dynamics between social media, mental health, and spirituality is crucial for mental health professionals striving to provide comprehensive care. As the world grapples with the mental health implications of digital engagement, addressing these challenges is vital for developing effective interventions and support systems. Howbeit, at large, this study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge base and offer insights that can inform practices and policies aimed at enhancing mental well-being in the digital age.

The Interplay of Social Media, Spirituality, and Mental Health: A Review of Literature

The advent of social media has revolutionized interpersonal communication, creating new paradigms for social interaction. However, its influence on mental health has sparked significant debate. Concurrently, spirituality is emerging as a critical factor in understanding mental health outcomes. This review seeks to explore the intersection of these two domains - social media and spirituality - and their collective impact on mental health, particularly in the African context. Recent studies highlight the nuanced effects of social media, revealing both its potential benefits and drawbacks on mental health. For instance, Orji and Louis (2021) underscore how social media can enhance social connections, yet they caution that excessive use may lead to anxiety and depression, particularly among Nigerian youth. Similarly, Oladapo et al. (2022) investigated the relationship between social media use and mental health disorders, noting that problematic use is significantly associated with negative mental health outcomes among younger populations in Nigeria. Moreover, spirituality emerges as a protective factor against mental health issues worsened by heavy social media use. Nwankwo (2023) opines that spirituality can foster resilience and provide individuals with coping strategies when confronting mental health challenges in the digital age. This review aims to synthesize existing literature on the effects of social media on mental health, with a particular focus on the mediating role of spirituality as a coping

mechanism. As social media continues to play a pivotal role in daily communication, understanding its dual impacts - both positive and negative - on mental health is of paramount importance. By exploring how spirituality can provide resilience and offer coping strategies for individuals facing mental health challenges exacerbated by social media, this review seeks to illuminate practical pathways for enhancing mental well-being across diverse populations in Africa.

Overview of Existing Literature on Social Media and Mental Health

Social media have positive and negative effects on the populace as it can serve as both a platform for connection and a source of distress. Twenge & Campbell (2018) indicates that while social media can foster social support, it may also lead to heightened feelings of isolation and anxiety. In Nigeria, studies have revealed mixed outcomes, where platforms like Facebook and Twitter (X) have facilitated community engagement but also contributed to mental health challenges, particularly among youth (Orosun, 2020). Numerous empirical studies have established a link between excessive social media use and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Keles et al. (2020) highlighted that increased social media use correlates with elevated levels of anxiety, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Adebayo et al. (2021) noted that heavy social media engagement among Nigerian students is associated with academic stress and depressive symptoms.

Exploration of Spirituality and Mental Health

Spirituality is often characterized as a personal journey that involves seeking meaning and connection beyond oneself (Mokgadi et al., 2019). It encompasses various dimensions, including existential well-being, religious practices, and personal growth. Spirituality has been identified as a vital coping mechanism in numerous studies. For example, Afolabi et al. (2020) examined the role of spirituality in coping with depression among Nigerian adolescents, finding that a strong sense of spirituality is associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms. This suggests that integrating spiritual practices may enhance resilience against the backdrop of social media-related mental health challenges. Meanwhile, despite the growing body of research, significant gaps still exist in understanding how spirituality moderates the effects of social media on mental health. Most existing studies focus on either social media or spirituality in isolation. Consequently, Uche (2022) suggests a comprehensive research that simultaneously examines these variables and their collective impact on mental health outcomes in diverse populations, which is the rationale and propelling factor for this study.

The existing literature illustrates a nuanced relationship between social media, spirituality, and mental health. While social media can pose risks to mental well-being, spirituality emerges as a promising buffer against such challenges. Recognizing this interplay is crucial for developing effective mental health interventions, particularly in the African context where social media usage is on the rise.

Social Media Engagement and Spirituality: Implications for Mental Health in Nigerian Youth

This section explores the intersections of social media use, spirituality, and mental health outcomes among Nigerian youth. Given the increasing prevalence of social media in everyday life, understanding its impact on mental health, particularly in conjunction with spiritual practices, is critical. This study highlights patterns of social media engagement, the correlation with mental health symptoms, and the potential protective effects of spirituality, offering a comparative analysis of individuals engaged in spiritual practices versus those that are not. Recent studies revealed two major things about social media usage:

Patterns of Social Media Engagement among Participants: Studies have shown that social media engagement among Nigerian youth has surged, with platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, and Instagram being the most prevalent. A comprehensive survey conducted by Ayo and Olusola (2021) revealed that 76% of participants log on daily, spending an average of three to six hours. These findings align with the broader African context, where social media acts as both a source of connectivity and a vector for potential mental health issues (Dede, 2020).

Correlation between Social Media Use and Mental Health Symptoms: A significant correlation has been found between excessive social media use and increased mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression. Adeyemo and Bamidele (2022) indicated that participants who engaged in social media for more than six hours daily reported heightened levels of anxiety and feelings of loneliness. These findings reflect the dual nature of social media as a tool for social connection while also exacerbating feelings of isolation and inadequacy. On the other hands, spirituality and its impact on mental health outcomes have also been affirmed by researcher, and summarized thus:

Levels of Stress Reported by Individuals with Spiritual Practices: Individuals who actively engage in spiritual practices tend to report lower levels of stress. Chukwuma (2023) found that participants who practiced regular spiritual activities, such as prayer and meditation, exhibited reduced stress levels compared to their non-spiritual counterparts. This suggests that spirituality may serve as a coping mechanism, fostering a sense of peace and connection.

Emotional Resilience in Participants Engaging in Spirituality: The emotional resilience among participants engaged in spiritual practices was notably higher. Owolabi and Akinyemiju (2021) found that spiritual practices foster a supportive community, providing individuals with essential social support that enhances their emotional well-being. This underscores the potential of spirituality as a protective factor against the adverse effects of social media on mental health.

Comparatively, individuals without spiritual engagement exhibited higher levels of anxiety and depression, particularly in response to negative interactions on social media. Corroborating the above, Okafor and Iwuoha (2022) claimed that those who identified as spiritual reported a greater sense of control over their emotions and a lower incidence of negative psychological symptoms, indicating that spiritual engagement may mediate the relationship between social media use and mental health outcomes. This is align with existing literature suggesting that spiritual well-being can promote emotional resilience and reduces stress (Eluma & Ogbonna, 2021). Likewise, it underscores the importance of considering spirituality in discussions of mental health among Nigerian youth, particularly in the context of social media engagement, as understanding these relationships can inform targeted mental health initiatives and promote holistic well-being within this vulnerable population. As the youth demographic in Nigeria continues to grow, there is an urgent need for interventions that incorporate spiritual practices to mitigate the adverse mental health effects associated with social media.

The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health: Exploring the Role of Spirituality

The implications of excessive social media use on mental health, along with the potential role of spirituality as a protective factor are considered in this section. By integrating findings from contemporary studies and the insights of Nigerian and broader African scholars, this study emphasizes the need for counselors to incorporate spiritual practices into therapeutic strategies.

Implications of Excessive Social Media Use on Mental Health: The advent of social media has revolutionized communication, but its excessive use is increasingly linked to mental health challenges. Excessive use of social media has been linked to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among users. Fawzy et al. (2020) claimed that the curated nature of social media content can foster unrealistic comparisons and feelings of inadequacy, particularly among adolescents. Corroborating this, Odugbesan and Adetunji (2018) identified social media as a significant contributor to mental health issues in Nigerian youth. The compulsive need for validation through likes and comments can exacerbate mental health struggles, underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue within the African context. Keles, McCrae, & Greary (2020) indicated that prolonged engagement with social media can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. In the context of Nigeria, Akintunde, Oladunjoye, and Olola (2021) established that young adults are particularly susceptible, facing cyberbullying and unrealistic comparisons, which lead to decreased self-esteem and heightened psychological distress. These findings highlight the necessity of understanding the cultural nuances affecting social media's impact on mental health in different regions, including Africa.

The Role of Spirituality as a Protective Factor: Spirituality has been identified as a potential buffer or potential protective factor against adverse mental health outcomes or issues associated with social media use. Ibeneme et al. (2019) indicated that individuals with strong spiritual beliefs often demonstrate higher resilience and lower susceptibility to psychiatric disorders. Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and community participation can provide emotional support and foster a sense of belonging during turbulent times. The integration of spirituality into therapeutic practices resonates with the work of Olatunji (2017), who emphasized the importance of culturally relevant interventions in promoting mental well-being. Also, Afolabi (2022) suggested that spiritual engagement can promote resilience, providing individuals with coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges posed by social media. In African cultures, where spirituality often intertwines with daily life, the role of religious practices and beliefs in fostering mental wellness is pronounced. This indicates the viability of spirituality as a complementary approach alongside traditional therapeutic practices.

Relevance of Spirituality for Mental Health and Counseling: This could be viewed in two basic ways. Firstly, spiritual practices can be integrated into therapeutic strategies. Therapists can incorporate spiritual practices into their strategies to address the unique needs of clients, especially in

culturally rich societies. Integrating spiritual practices into mental health counseling can enhance therapeutic outcomes. Chukwuma & Abasiubong (2021) ascertained that by acknowledging clients' spiritual beliefs and practices, counselors can create a more holistic and comprehensive therapeutic environment. Examples include integrating mindfulness practices rooted in spiritual traditions or facilitating discussions around spirituality and meaning-making as part of the therapeutic process. In line with the above, Idowu and Adebiyi (2023) highlighted that techniques such as mindfulness meditation, prayer, and community engagement can be employed in therapy to reaffirm clients' spiritual beliefs and values. Thus, practitioners should be trained to recognize and respect the spiritual dimensions of their clients, fostering a holistic approach to mental health care that considers individual belief systems. Secondly, it is recommended for pastoral counselors and mental health professionals to undertake training in recognizing signs of mental health issues exacerbated by social media use. They play crucial roles in addressing the mental health crisis exacerbated by social media within congregational contexts. It is recommended that they collaborate to develop an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychological techniques and spiritual guidance. Ogunleye & Ifediora (2021) opined that collaborating with mental health professionals can create a referral network that enhances client support. Likewise, Oguntibeju (2022) suggested that training programs should prepare counselors to recognize and address the spiritual dimensions of mental health. Both fields can benefit from shared resources, workshops, and seminars that explore the intersection of spirituality and psychological well-being. Moreover, incorporating educational programs that focus on healthy social media habits can empower individuals to create balanced lifestyles that prioritize mental wellness.

Conclusion

This study presents a critical examination of the intricate relationship between social media usage and mental health outcomes, particularly highlighting the potential of spirituality as an effective coping mechanism. As a result of the complexities of the digital age, it has become increasingly evident that the rapid proliferation of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of communication, offer avenues for connection and self-expression. However, the excessive use of these platforms may adversely affect mental health across various demographics as they also pose significant risks to mental well-being, especially among youths and younger adults. The study underscores a clear correlation between excessive social media engagement and heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress.

However, this study does not merely dwell on the challenges posed by social media; it also emphasizes the resilience offered by spiritual practices. By engaging in spirituality, individuals can foster a sense of purpose and community, which serve as protective factors against the adversities exacerbated by digital interactions. This dual focus on the detrimental effects of social media and the restorative potential of spirituality provides a distinct understanding of mental health that is particularly relevant in African contexts, where communal values and spiritual beliefs play a central role in coping strategies. Consequently, understanding the implications of social media use on mental health and exploring the role of spirituality as a protective factor can offer valuable insights.

Likewise, the study examined the effects of social media on mental health, and assessed the relevance of spiritual practices in therapy. The implications of excessive social media use on mental health, the role of spirituality as a protective factor, and the relevance for mental health and counseling were subsequently established. The relationship between social media use and mental health is multifaceted, with spirituality emerging as a significant protective factor. Thus, as mental health professionals and community leaders strive to address these pressing issues, integrating spirituality into therapeutic practices can enhance support mechanisms for individuals navigating the digital landscape. Therefore, it advocates for a holistic approach that acknowledges both the challenges of social media and the transformative potential of spirituality, offering valuable insights for effective mental health interventions.

Recommendations

The study put forward below recommendations:

1. ***Incorporation of Spirituality in Mental Health Interventions:*** Mental health practitioners or professionals and pastoral counselors should integrate spiritual approaches or practices into therapeutic tactics, recognizing their potential to enhance emotional resilience and provide individuals with a sense of purpose. This could involve tailoring interventions to reflect cultural and spiritual backgrounds, thereby fostering a more holistic treatment process and offering effective support.

2. ***Digital Literacy Programs:*** Implementation of educational programs that focus on digital literacy and mental health awareness in schools and communities, will enable individuals, especially younger populations, to know about the impacts of social media on mental well-being and how to engage with these platforms mindfully.
3. ***Community Support Initiatives:*** Societies should establish community support networks that encourage spiritual engagement and promote positive mental health. Such initiatives could include group meditation, communal prayer sessions, or discussion groups that reinforce values centered on spirituality, thereby building a sense of belonging.
4. ***Research Advancements:*** Further research into the intersection of spirituality and mental health, particularly within diverse cultural contexts should be encouraged. This could lead to the development of tailored interventions that resonate with individuals from various backgrounds and belief systems.
5. ***Awareness Campaigns:*** Mental health practitioners or professionals and pastoral counselors should launch awareness campaigns highlighting the dual nature of social media, showcasing both its benefits and potential harms. These campaigns could feature testimonials and case studies that illustrate the importance of balancing digital interactions with spiritual and community engagements.
6. ***Policy Development:*** Policy makers at all governmental levels and social strata should advocate for policies that prioritize mental health in the digital age, ensuring that social media companies take responsibility for the mental well-being of their users. This could involve implementing measures to mitigate harmful content and promote positive online interactions.
7. ***Parental Guidance Resources:*** Mental health professionals, educators, religious and community leaders should develop resources aimed at parents and guardians to equip them with strategies for supporting their children in navigating social media. These resources should emphasize open communication about online experiences and the importance of fostering spiritual and emotional well-being.

By following the above recommendations, mental health professionals, educators, counselors, religious and community leaders can collectively work towards creating an environment that supports mental well-being while harnessing the positive aspects of technology and spirituality.

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