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From Screens to Skills: Evaluating Social Media as a Tool for Social Development among Nigerian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Background: The integration of social media into the daily lives of university students has significantly altered traditional modes of interaction. While these platforms revolutionise communication and relationship maintenance, there is an ongoing debate regarding their influence on the development of essential social skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, and verbal communication in the Nigerian context.

Objective: This study sought to ascertain the extent of social media exposure among students at Dennis Osadebay University and Admiralty University of Nigeria, determine their specific usage patterns, and evaluate the effectiveness of these platforms in the development of their social skills.

Methodology: A survey research design was adopted, utilising a structured questionnaire to collect data from a sample of university students. A sample size of 385 was determined using the Yaro Yamane formula, with 375 usable copies retrieved for analysis. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages.

Results: The findings revealed that 96.8% of respondents are exposed to social media to a large extent. Students spend considerable time on these platforms, with 41.9% spending 1-3 hours and 30.4% spending 3-5 hours daily. TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp emerged as the most frequently used platforms. While 61.1% of respondents attested to the effectiveness of social media in cultivating social skills, 34.1% disagreed, citing issues such as reduced physical interaction and distractions during study.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social media is an effective instrument for social skills cultivation among university students despite negative impacts such as social withdrawal and academic distraction. It is recommended that students exercise self-discipline to avoid over-exposure and that university authorities organise orientation workshops to highlight the hazards of over-indulgence.

Keywords: Social media, Social skills, Impact, Development, University students

Introduction

There is a significant link between social media and the development of social skills among university students in Nigeria, with the former frequently acting as a catalyst for the latter. As social media becomes increasingly integral to daily life, students are spending more time interacting online and less time engaging in face-to-face interactions. This paradigm shift has sparked a debate regarding the potential effects of social media on students' ability to develop essential social skills, such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) rightly note, the advent of social media has revolutionised the way people interact, communicate, and maintain relationships. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, and TikTok have become an essential part of modern life, especially among university students. This trend explains why Duggan and Brenner (2013) posit that young people were the first to fully appreciate this new medium, with international data suggesting that 83% of those aged 18–29 are active social media users.

Turkle (2015) observes that it is now common to see youths chatting on their devices even in solemn environments such as churches. Youths no longer need to visit cybercafés to send or receive messages, and their attention has largely shifted from visible, physical companions to invisible, digital friends. We Are Social and Hootsuite (2022) corroborates this by noting that the primary reasons people aged 16–64 use social media are to stay in touch with family and friends, fill free time, and share ideas with others. These assertions validate the findings of the Pew Research Center (2021), which indicate that university students are among the most active users, often spending several hours a day on various digital platforms. Furthermore, Agarwal et al. (2024) suggest that social media enhances awareness of social issues, with 54% of students reporting high awareness after exposure. However, this high level of engagement also supports Turkle's (2015) claim that excessive social media use can negatively affect academic performance.

Against this backdrop, it is crucial for university students to develop social skills that are vital to their academic and personal success. Reddy (2019) describes social skills as the verbal and non-verbal tools used to communicate and cooperate with others through signals and personal appearance. For instance, research by Edegoh et al. (2013) found that Facebook is a significant medium for relationship management among students. These findings are supported by Boyd and Ellison (2010), who revealed that social media provides opportunities for networking and collaboration. Conversely, Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) argue that social media can hinder social development by reducing face-to-face interactions and promoting social isolation. Supporting this negative view, Edegoh et al. (2013) noted that students often spend more time on social media than reading, leading to decreased academic performance.

Despite these insights, there remains a general lack of understanding regarding the specific ways social media influences social skill development among university students in Nigeria. While previous studies have explored this relationship in other contexts, there is a dearth of research from a Nigerian perspective. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of social media on the development of social skills among students at Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, and Admiralty University of Nigeria, Ibusa.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Ascertain the extent to which students of Dennis Osadebay University and Admiralty University of Nigeria were exposed to social media.
2. Determine the usage patterns of social media among students of these two institutions.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of social media in the development of social skills among students in these universities.

Clarification of Key Terms and Linkages

The impact of social media on the development of social skills among university students is a complex subject requiring an analysis of both the science of networking and issues surrounding skills acquisition. Consequently, the conceptual scheme is best articulated by defining the core terms and examining the relationships between them to place social media, social skills, impact, development, and university students in their proper perspective.

- *Social Media:* While various media can facilitate social skills development, social media platforms are particularly effective due to their pervasive nature and electronic transmission of information. In this study, social media is restricted to platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter), which are widely used for socializing and online communication, excluding traditional electronic media like radio and television. Idiong (2015) and Croteau and Hoynes (2003) attest to the superiority of these platforms due to their technological sophistication, though it remains noted that society is still learning how to manage them effectively.
- *Social Skills:* These are the tools used to navigate social situations, cooperate with others, and form meaningful connections. Within this study, the term refers to the abilities and strategies available to university students to build relationships, express themselves openly, and effectively communicate their feelings and thoughts.
- *University Students:* This group refers to young adults or undergraduate students, typically aged 18–25, enrolled in higher education institutions in pursuit of a degree.
- *Impact:* This describes the ways in which social media platforms shape or modify the social skills, self-expression, and relationship-building efforts of university students.
- *Development:* This refers to the gradual process of acquiring, refining, and mastering the ability to interact effectively with others. It encompasses competencies like communication, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Development is a lifelong process involving cognitive growth, behavioural practice, and adaptation based on feedback.

The relevance of these terms is further highlighted by their intricate linkages. For students to cultivate social skills, social media must provide content that positively impacts their attitudes and behaviour. It is not merely about regular content, but rather specific interactions that help students communicate their thoughts and feelings effectively.

Conceptual Review of Related Literature

Studies provide significant insights into how social media affects the expression of social skills, yet most literature focuses on psychological or academic perspectives rather than the actual cultivation of these skills among Nigerian public university students. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media as internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 that allow the exchange of user-generated content, a function central to social networking and skill development. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that these platforms have revolutionised interaction, becoming an integral part of modern life for students.

The Social Media Landscape

Social media has shifted the internet from a space of information broadcast to one where users generate their own content. These platforms take many forms, including forums, blogs, and social networks. While digital natives rely heavily on these platforms for interaction and self-expression , the full impact on social skills is still being debated. Some research suggests these tools enhance communication, while others, such as Kirschner and Karpinski (2010), argue that excessive use leads to social deficits.

The Nature of Social Skills and Development

Social skills represent the ability to interact effectively in various contexts, encompassing active listening and emotional intelligence. Unlike innate biological traits, these skills are cultivated through experience and practice. Bandura (1986) suggests that development is a gradual process nurtured through continuous social exposure. In a university setting, this occurs through peer interactions and group projects. However, this process is influenced by personality and environmental factors.

Mechanisms for development include:

- Social Learning: Acquiring skills through observation and imitation.
- Cultural Influence: Norms and societal expectations shape how individuals interact.
- Feedback: Positive reinforcement from peers and mentors encourages behavioural adjustments.

The Nigerian Context and Research Gaps

Adetoro and Okike (2022) found that while Nigerian undergraduates possess digital fluency, they often lack offline skills like eye contact and active listening, leading to discomfort in physical settings. Olugbade et al. (2023) further noted that students may prefer texting to talking, which

limits their ability to navigate complex social situations. Additionally, Ademiluyi et al. (2019) observed that while constructive use aids communication, casual use can reduce attention spans.

A noticeable gap remains regarding the gradual cultivation of social skills, specifically in Delta State. This study addresses that gap by examining how social media influences students at Dennis Osadebay University and Admiralty University, providing localised insights into the African academic context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theory of technological determinism, propounded by the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929). This reductionist theory assumes that a society's technology is the primary force shaping the development of its social and cultural values. Globally, advancements in technology have triggered a revolution in the communication industry. The proliferation of social media channels has made information sharing faster and easier, providing university students with platforms that encourage more time spent interacting online and less time engaging in face-to-face interactions.

Before the advent of social media, university students were less able to effectively cultivate and develop their social skills through traditional media. This limitation existed because traditional media did not provide the interactive platforms necessary to help students achieve such goals. In contrast, social media engenders active participation. As Vartanova (2014) and James et al. (2025) opine, the traditional audience, which was once passive, has now assumed a more central and influential role. Consequently, university students often feel more confident expressing themselves online because they can edit and refine their messages before sending them. While this controlled interaction style enhances digital confidence, it does not always translate to real-life adaptability. Furthermore, over-reliance on digital interactions can lead to a preference for online conversations over face-to-face discussions, which may negatively impact students' real-world social skills.

This theory provides a comprehensive lens for analysing how social media influences the cultivation and development of social skills among university students. The theoretical construct directly supports the research objectives by providing a basis to ascertain the extent of exposure, usage patterns, and perceived effects of social media on students at Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, and Admiralty University of Nigeria, Ibusa.

Methodology

Design and Sampling

The researchers employed a survey design method, utilising a structured questionnaire as the primary research instrument. The survey design is a reliable approach for data collection, particularly when studying large populations to describe specific behavioural patterns. The target population for this study comprised students from Dennis Osadebay University (DOU), Asaba, and Admiralty University of Nigeria (ADUN), Ibusa, both located in Delta State. According to institutional records for the 2024/2025 academic session, DOU has a student population of

approximately 8,800, while ADUN has approximately 1,600. This results in a combined total population of 10,400 students.

To determine an appropriate sample size, the researchers applied the Yaro Yamane formula, resulting in a sample of 385 participants. A multi-stage sampling technique was implemented as follows:

- *Purposive Sampling*: This procedure was used to select six departments from Dennis Osadebay University and two departments from Admiralty University of Nigeria. Furthermore, purposive sampling was employed to specifically target final-year students, as their prolonged exposure to social media was deemed likely to provide more accurate insights into social skills cultivation.
- *Stratified Sampling:* This method was used to categorise the population based on gender to ensure balanced representation.
- *Simple Random Sampling*: Finally, this procedure was used to select individual respondents from the identified strata across the population.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. The researchers strictly maintained confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process, ensuring that the data collected were used solely for this research project.

Based on the results presented in your manuscript, the method of data analysis can be described as follows:

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected through the structured questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics. This approach was chosen to effectively summarise and describe students' behavioural patterns and responses regarding social media use and social skills development. The specific techniques employed included:

- Frequency Distribution: This was used to determine the number of respondents for each category across the various tables, such as the level of exposure and the specific platforms used.
- Simple Percentages: Percentages were calculated to provide a clear, proportional representation of the data, allowing for easy comparison between different variables such as time spent online and perceived effectiveness of social media.
- Tabular Presentation: The analysed data were organised into thematic tables to enhance clarity and facilitate the interpretation of findings in relation to the research objectives.

Results

The result of the study is presented below:

Return Rate of the Questionnaire

The study began by distributing 385 copies of the questionnaire to students across both institutions. Of these, 375 copies were returned and found to be usable, representing a high return rate that forms the basis of the subsequent analysis.

Table 1: Questionnaire Return Rate

Institution	No. of Respondents	No. Retrieved	Percentage (%)
Dennis Osadebay University (DOU)	326	318	84.8
Admiralty University of Nigeria (ADUN)	59	57	15.2
Total	385	375	100

Level of Social Media Exposure

Data regarding student exposure to social media indicate a near-universal engagement with digital platforms. As shown in Table 2, 96.8% of the respondents (363 students) reported being exposed to social media to a large or very large extent.

Table 2: Level of Social Media Exposure

Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
To a very large extent	106	28.3
To a large extent	257	68.5
Can't say	4	1.1
To a low extent	8	2.1
To a very low extent	0	0
Total	375	100

Usage Patterns of Social Media

To understand the digital habits of students at DOU and ADUN, the study examined daily time spent, preferred platforms, and primary purposes of use.

Table 3: Social Media Usage Patterns

Options	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Daily Hours Spent		
1–3 hours	157	41.9
3–5 hours	114	30.4
0–1 hour	64	17.1
5+ hours	40	10.6
Most Used Platforms		
TikTok	100	26.7
Snapchat	75	20
WhatsApp	66	17.6
Instagram	58	15.5
Facebook	50	13.3
X (formerly Twitter)	26	6.9
Primary Use		
Academic Work	165	44
Socializing/Entertainment	123	32.8
News/Business	87	23.2

The findings in Table 3 reveal that 72.3% of students spend between 1 and 5 hours daily on social media. TikTok (26.7%), Snapchat (20.0%), and WhatsApp (17.6%) are the most popular platforms. Interestingly, 44% of respondents identified academic work as their primary use for social media. While 87.2% affirmed that social media significantly improved their academic performance, a substantial majority (303 respondents) admitted to being frequently distracted by these platforms during study sessions.

Effectiveness of Social Media for Social Skills Development

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of social media in facilitating the development of their social skills.

Table 4: Perceived Effectiveness on Social Skills Development

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very effective	27	7.2

Effective	202	53.9
Can't tell	18	4.8
Ineffective	128	34.1
Very ineffective	0	0
Total	375	100

As illustrated in Table 4, a majority of 61.1% (229 respondents) viewed social media as an effective tool for social skills development. These students noted that the platforms enabled the sharing of ideas and increased collaboration. Conversely, 34.1% of the sample found the platforms ineffective for skill development.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that an overwhelming number of respondents are exposed to social media to a very large extent. Regarding the first objective—ascertaining the extent of exposure among students at Dennis Osadebay University and Admiralty University of Nigeria— the results indicate that 96.8% of respondents are significantly exposed to these platforms. This aligns with the assertions of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who noted that social media has revolutionised how people interact and maintain relationships, and that it has become an integral part of modern life for university students. However, as Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) argue, such high levels of consumption and overreliance on digital interaction can lead to a preference for online conversations over face-to-face discussions, potentially impacting real-world social skills. This exposure clearly carries both positive and negative influences.

The second objective was to determine the social media usage patterns of these students. The findings show that 41.9% of respondents spend 1–3 hours daily on social media, while 30.4% spend 3–5 hours. Students utilise various platforms for distinct purposes:

- TikTok (26.7%): Primarily used for entertainment and following trends.
- Snapchat (20%): Favoured for quick, casual conversations and sharing daily moments.
- WhatsApp (17.6%): Utilised for class group chats and study coordination.
- Instagram (15.5%) and Facebook (13.3%): Used for sharing photos, staying updated on events, and official announcements.

The third objective sought to discover the effectiveness of social media in developing social skills. The data indicates that social media usage for this purpose is perceived as effective by the majority of respondents. The platforms serve as tools that enhance social interaction by allowing students to stay connected regardless of distance and meet others with similar interests. This supports the findings of Ademiluyi et al. (2019), who noted that constructive use of academic and educational networking improves students' confidence and clarity in communication. Furthermore, Boyd and Ellison (2007) highlight benefits such as enhanced connectivity and opportunities for self-expression.

Conversely, the study also highlights significant drawbacks. Excessive social media use has been linked to negative effects on academic performance when students prioritise digital engagement over reading. Additionally, as Adetoro and Okike (2022) observed, increased online interaction can lead to a withdrawal from physical settings or discomfort in group environments. While useful for collaboration and peer bonding, social media can simultaneously reduce in-person interactions and limit a student's ability to navigate emotionally complex, real-world social situations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media remains an effective tool for cultivating and developing social skills among university students. It serves as a valuable tool that enhances real-life social interaction by allowing students to stay connected regardless of distance, maintain long-term relationships, and find others with shared interests. However, the study also highlights that while these digital platforms are useful for academic collaboration and peer bonding, they can simultaneously reduce in-person interactions and limit the ability of students to navigate complex, real-world social situations.

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made:

1. University students should exercise self-discipline and consciously avoid over-exposure to social media, particularly for non-academic purposes. Excessive time spent on these channels at the expense of reading can lead to poor academic performance.
2. Parents should engage in moral instruction, teaching their children that all that glitters is not gold. This is intended to discourage an over-reliance on social media for developing social skills and to encourage a more balanced approach to interaction.
3. University authorities should organise seminars and workshops focusing on the hazards associated with over-indulgence in social media. These sessions should ideally be held at the start of each academic session as a formal component of the orientation course for students.

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