



SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND IDENTITY CRISIS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN EDO STATE: DO GENDER AND ECONOMIC STATUS MATTER?

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between identity crisis and social media use among undergraduate students at public universities in Edo State, Nigeria. The extent of social media use, possible gender disparities in its impacts, and the moderating influence of economic status were all investigated. According to the results of a structured questionnaire and a correlational study design, social media usage was high ($M = 3.564$), suggesting frequent use of digital platforms. Social media use was found to be significantly positively correlated with identity crisis, indicating that increased online engagement may be a contributing factor to identity confusion. Male and female students are equally impacted, as evidenced by the lack of discernible gender distinctions. Nonetheless, there was a strong correlation between vulnerability and economic position; students from lower-income families were more likely to face identity-related difficulties. In order to promote healthy identity development and lessen the detrimental effects of social media, the study suggests implementing digital literacy programs, bolstering psychosocial support services, and offering focused treatments for students from low-income families.

Keywords: Economic Status, Gender Differences, Identity Crisis, Public Universities, Social Media Usage

Introduction

Social media platforms provide a dynamic, often hyper-visual arena for students, particularly undergraduates, to experiment with and have identities. Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp appear to favour curated, aestheticised, and socially validated forms of self-representation. In such environments, students may feel pressured to adopt or copy personas, lifestyles, or attitudes that do not necessarily reflect their true selves. Mafa and Chigwedere (2023) characterize this phenomena as the development of "borrowed identities," in which users internalize dominant online norms such as beauty standards, material success, and social status and shape their digital presence accordingly. This identity mimicry is not just an act of expression; it is frequently a reaction to platform algorithms and social dynamics that prioritize attention, likes, and shares. When peer validation becomes crucial to a student's sense of self-worth, it establishes a fragile identity foundation that is largely reliant on external validation. Pressure to conform to idealized online personas can cause dissonance between online and offline identities, affecting students' self-concept and psychological stability (Mafa & Chigwedere, 2023). This pattern is especially prominent among Nigerian undergraduates, owing to the convergence of globalization, young culture, and poor psychosocial support structures. Agunbiade, Obiyan, and Sogbaïke (2013) notice that students regularly participate in performance-driven identity creation, with their profiles often projecting ambitions rather than reality. For example, students from low-income families may present themselves as wealthy by displaying expensive clothing, luxury devices, or stylized travel video, not because they own such, but because such displays are valued in online forums.



Although performance-driven identity construction appears to be empowering, it can often lead to increased worry, self-doubt, and a loss of personal authenticity. The continual comparison with allegedly "perfect" peers and influencers generates feelings of inadequacy, especially when offline realities do not match online appearances. Over time, such inconsistency can lead to an identity crisis, in which the individual is unsure of who they genuinely are outside of the controlled picture given to the public. Undergraduates' usage of social media allows for not only self-expression but also identity experimentation, which may be both beneficial and detrimental. When digital identity becomes performative and externally sanctioned, it can cause enormous psychosocial distress, especially in countries like Nigeria where cultural, economic, and institutional pressures seem to already place a heavy burden on youth.

Statement of Problem

In the digital age, social media platforms have become an essential component of young people's lives, particularly among university students. These platforms facilitate communication, education, self-expression, and social interaction and validation. However, the immersive and performative character of social media may pose challenges to identity development, especially for undergraduate students who are in the process of self-discovery and social integration. Recent studies, such as Nwonyi et al. (2024) and Mafa and Chigwedere (2023), have demonstrated that regular social media use can contribute to identity instability, self-comparison, and even narcissistic tendencies, particularly when people curate idealized versions of themselves online. In places such as Edo State, Nigeria, where socio-cultural influences and economic inequities already appear to shape youth experiences, social media's influence on identity development may be even stronger. Female students and those from affluent families may experience greater pressure to project aspirational images of success, beauty, and popularity, which further complicates their sense of self-worth and authenticity (Agunbiade, Obiyan, & Sogbaike, 2013; Egielewa et al., 2021).

Despite increasing concerns, there is relatively little research on how social media use contributes to identity crises among Nigerian undergraduates, particularly in terms of gender and socioeconomic status (SES). The combination of these elements may influence how students interact with social media, how they view themselves, and their susceptibility to identity confusion or psychological distress. There is an urgent need to investigate how gender and socioeconomic status influence the relationship between social media use and identity crises, specifically in the Nigerian higher education context.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- i. access the level of social media usage,
- ii. determine if there is a relationship between social media usage and identity crisis among undergraduate students,
- iii. establish the difference in social media usage and identity crisis based on gender of the students, and to
- iv. determine if there is a difference in social media usage and identity crisis based on economic status of the students.

Theoretical Foundation

The theories upon which this study is anchored are: Psychological Theory of Identity Development, Social Comparison Theory and Theory of Social Capital and Habitus.

1. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Identity Development (1968): Erikson's theory highlights identity formation as a key developmental task during adolescence and early adulthood, a period that typically overlaps with university life. During this stage, individuals work to define their personal, social, and career identities. Erikson argues that failure to form a stable identity can lead to confusion and crisis. Undergraduate students in Edo State fall squarely within this "Identity vs. Role Confusion" phase. Social media, with its endless stream of curated content, social comparisons, and instant feedback (likes, comments, shares), can either aid or disrupt this identity-building process. The pressure to fit into online



norms can undermine authentic self-discovery, increasing the risk of identity crisis, particularly for vulnerable groups like young women and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

2. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): Festinger's Social Comparison Theory suggests that people evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, especially when clear benchmarks are lacking. Social media amplifies this tendency by offering carefully curated snapshots of peers, influencers, and celebrities. For students, frequent exposure to these idealized portrayals can trigger upward comparisons, fueling feelings of inadequacy, envy, and identity stress. Female students, in particular, may be more prone to comparing their appearance and social presence, increasing the risk of dissatisfaction and emotional instability. This framework helps explain how social media use can undermine identity development among undergraduates.

3. Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital and Habitus (1986): Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *capital*, particularly social and economic capital, offer valuable insight into how socioeconomic status (SES) shapes digital engagement. *Habitus* reflects the ingrained behaviors and dispositions formed by one's socioeconomic background. Students from higher-SES families often have greater access to digital tools, media literacy, and culturally privileged content. This "digital habitus" enables them to navigate social media more frequently and strategically. However, this same access can increase pressure to curate and maintain images of success, reinforcing performative identities and internal conflict. In contrast, students from lower-SES backgrounds may face digital exclusion, limited access, and fewer opportunities for authentic self-expression online, making them more vulnerable to identity instability.

Together, these theoretical frameworks support the hypothesis that social media use significantly impacts identity development among undergraduates, with gender and SES acting as key moderating factors.

Reviewed Literature

Gender Differences and Social Media Use

Research by Egielewa et al (2021) shows that young women are more active on social media than their male peers, often using it for emotional expression, relationship building, and social connection. While these uses can foster community, they also increase exposure to idealized images and lifestyles, making female users more vulnerable to social comparison. This often centers on appearance, success, and lifestyle, which can fuel identity confusion, low self-esteem, and psychological distress core elements of an identity crisis. This gendered pattern is not limited to global trends; it's also evident among Nigerian youth. Agunbiade, Obiyan, and Sogbaike (2013) found that female undergraduates in Nigeria frequently use visual content, particularly curated and edited photographs, to construct their online identities. This emphasis on visual self-presentation reinforces the need for validation through likes, comments, and shares, linking self-worth to fluctuating digital feedback. Such behavior reflects broader societal pressures.

In many African contexts, including Nigeria, young women face intense scrutiny over appearance and social presentation. This cultural narrative deepens the pressure to maintain an idealized online persona, making identity formation more performative and less rooted in authenticity. As a result, female students face unique risks, digital fatigue, anxiety, and long-term identity disturbances, especially when their online image clashes with their real-world self. These gender-specific patterns in social media use significantly shape how identity develops, often placing young women at greater psychological risk.

Socio-Economic Status (SES) and Social Media Use

Socio-economic status (SES) significantly influences students' access to digital tools and their patterns of social media use. Access to Smartphones, laptops, internet data, and reliable electricity is often shaped by family income and educational background. These resources determine not only how frequently students go online but also which platforms they use and the quality of content they consume or create. Students from higher-SES families are more likely to own advanced devices and engage more deeply in digital



trends. Oyeboade (2017) found that undergraduates from wealthier backgrounds were significantly more likely to use multiple platforms and spend more time online. The study revealed a strong association between SES and social media use ($\chi^2 = 9.797$, $p < 0.05$; $r = .305$), with peer pressure also playing a key role. Together, SES and peer influence predicted 9.3% of the variance in social media usage patterns ($R^2 = .093$).

These findings show that SES disparities go beyond access, they shape the social and psychological contexts of digital engagement. Students from lower-income households often face digital exclusion, making it harder to keep up with trends, express themselves online, or participate in digital learning environments. Their limited access restricts identity exploration and can negatively impact academic and social development. Ultimately, SES shapes how students experience the digital world from the tools they use to how they construct and perform their identities online. Rather than equalizing opportunities, social media often reflects and reinforces broader socio-economic inequalities.

Identity Crisis: Gender and Socioeconomic Status

At Edo State University, Uzairue et al. (2021) identified WhatsApp as the most frequently used social media platform among undergraduates, serving both social and academic functions. Students use the app for group discussions, lecture updates, and information sharing, making it central to their daily routines. Notably, the study found a positive correlation between WhatsApp usage and academic performance, especially among younger students who tend to be more digitally engaged and adaptable in using social media as an academic tool. However, the study also highlighted a generational digital divide. Older students were less likely to leverage platforms like WhatsApp for academic purposes, often viewing them as distractions rather than resources. This divide suggests that age, digital competence, and attitudes toward technology influence how students engage with educational tools online.

Complicating this landscape further are intersections of age, gender, and socio-economic status (SES). Female students from high-SES backgrounds, for example, often face intensified social pressures, both online and offline, to project polished, aspirational identities. Platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram become more than communication tools; they become stages for displaying beauty, affluence, and social relevance. While these students may have the resources to curate such digital personas, the emotional toll can be high. The constant need to maintain idealized self-images, driven by likes, comments, and peer validation can lead to identity confusion, emotional fatigue, and diminished academic focus.

This negotiation between self-presentation and authenticity is psychologically taxing, especially when a student's offline life diverges sharply from the image they project online. In this context, digital engagement becomes deeply social and performative, shaped by underlying inequalities and cultural expectations. Nwonyi et al. (2024) further reinforce this point. Their study found that social media use strongly predicts narcissism among undergraduates ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, gender moderated this effect, with male students being more prone to narcissistic traits such as self-promotion and image obsession ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .001$). In contrast, female students were more likely to fall into cycles of social comparison, self-objectification, and identity insecurity—patterns that suggest different psychological vulnerabilities across genders.

These gendered dynamics are echoed in other sub-Saharan contexts. Mafa and Chigwedere (2023), for instance, observed that many young Zimbabwean women create "borrowed identities" online—idealized personas modeled after influencers and peers. These identities often emerge as coping mechanisms in response to societal beauty standards and pressures to appear successful. Yet, the psychological cost is steep: emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and a persistent gap between online performance and offline reality. Given the cultural and socio-economic parallels in Nigeria, including patriarchal norms, youth unemployment, and widespread Smartphone access, young women in Edo State are likely experiencing similar pressures. The need to be seen as beautiful, successful, and socially relevant turns social media into



a high-stakes environment for identity formation, especially for affluent female undergraduates with greater access to digital platforms.

These findings underscore that social media is not just a tool for communication, it's a powerful socio-cultural force that shapes identity, reinforces gender norms, and reflects broader inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires more than improving access; it demands gender-sensitive digital literacy programs and mental health interventions that confront the deeper identity-related stressors students face in digital spaces.

Methodology

In line with the study's objectives, a descriptive survey research design was employed to collect data on the relationship between Social Media use and Identity crisis among undergraduate students. The target population comprised all full-time currently enrolled third-year Students. At the time of the study, the distribution of students was as follows: University of Benin – 5,731 and Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma – 4,628 (Academic Planning Division, 2024/2025). A purposive sampling technique was used in order to ensure that sample size represents both sexes, and 300 level students are most likely to have settled into the academic routine and as such may have mastered the academic schedule and as a result may have more time in their hands to engage in Social media activities. A sample of 225 students (Male = 86; Female = 139). Data were collected using a researcher-designed instrument titled *Social Media Usage and Identity Crisis of Undergraduate Students Questionnaire* (SMUICUSQ). The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A captured demographic information, while Section B comprised items related to social media usage and identity crisis, measured using a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 4 to Strongly Disagree = 1).

The instrument's content validity was confirmed by a senior academic in the Department of Educational Evaluation and Counselling Psychology, University of Benin. Reliability was established through a test-retest procedure conducted with a separate group of 30 undergraduates not included in the main study. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.89 was obtained, indicating high reliability. Data collected were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Usage of Social Media Usage

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
Posting photos/videos	225	3.493	0.702	High
Linking/commenting on others' posts	225	3.462	0.694	High
Watching videos/stories/reels	225	3.564	0.603	High
Chatting/direct messages	225	3.698	0.498	High
Reading/sharing	225	3.604	0.558	High
Average	225	3.564	0.611	High

Source: Researcher's field work (2025); Criterion mean (\bar{x}) = 2.50

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of social media usage in public universities in Edo State. The total average social media usage mean was 3.564, while the criterion mean was 2.50. Comparing the two values reveals that the total average mean is higher than the criterion mean, which means that the level of social media usage was generally high.



Table 2: Relationship between social media usage and identity crisis among undergraduate students

Variables	N	R	p	Rank	Decision
Social Media Usage Identity Crisis	235	0.673	.000	Significant	Reject HO ₁

In Table 2, the results presented shows that the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.673$) shows a strong positive correlation between social media usage and identity crisis. This means as students' social media usage increases, their experience of identity crisis also increases. This means the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between social media usage and identity crisis is rejected.

Table 3: Difference in Social Media Usage and Identity Crisis based on the Gender of the Students

Variables	N	r	Zr	Cal. Z	Crit. Z	Decision
Male	86	0.641	1.686	-0.589	±1.96	Not significant
Female	139	0.686	0.314			

$p < 0.05$

As shown in Table 3, male undergraduate students have an r value of 0.641 and a transformed z value (Z_r) of 1.686. While female undergraduate students have an r value of 0.686 and transformed z value (Z_r) of 0.314, thus yielding a calculated Z value of -0.589, which is less than the critical Z value of 1.96 at a 0.05 alpha level. To this end, the hypothesis is retained. This suggests that there is no significant difference in the relationship between male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Edo State.

Table 4: Difference in social media usage and identity crisis based on economic status of the students.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.508E-14	.000		0.000	1.000
	Income	1.000	.000	0.321	76061788.160	0.000
	Occupation	1.000	.000	0.317	68676958.200	0.000
	Household Assets	1.000	.000	0.276	61393069.060	0.000
	Housing Characteristics	1.000	.000	0.228	53876973.000	0.000
	Access to Basic Needs	1.000	.000	0.255	60089812.310	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Social Media Usage and Identity Crisis

As shown in Table 4, the (Constant) value is practically zero (3.508E-14) and not significant ($p = 1.000$), meaning the baseline level of identity crisis without any predictors is negligible or assumed to be zero. Meanwhile, all independent variables (income, occupation, assets, housing, basic needs) are statistically significant predictors of social media usage and identity crisis ($p < .001$). The standardized beta coefficients show that income ($\beta = .321$) is the strongest predictor. This was followed closely by occupation ($\beta = .317$) and household assets ($\beta = .276$). This suggests that economic status factors are positively associated with increased vulnerability to identity crisis via social media.

Discussion of Findings

Findings in Table 1 indicate that the average mean of social media usage is 3.564, which implies that social media usage in public universities is very high and may pose a serious identity crisis among undergraduates. This finding is in line with the findings of Nwonyi et al. (2024) whose findings show that intensive use of



social media is associated with self-image distortion and identity-related behaviors, especially among youth. Twenge & Campbell (2018) added that constant exposure to curated online images and social comparison may lead to identity instability. This perhaps justifies the reason why Mafa & Chigwedere (2023) states that social media drives young people to construct false identities for social approval. Yang & Brown (2016) further clarified that high usage leads to difficulty in forming a stable, authentic identity, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood.

In Table 2, the finding shows that there is a significant relationship between social media usage and identity crisis. Students may constantly compare themselves to others on social media platforms. Seeing idealized images of peers, celebrities, or influencers can lead to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, or low self-worth. Over time, this undermines a stable self-image and creates confusion about personal identity. Supporting this finding, Tazghini and Siedlecki (2013) added that students who used social media more often reported lower identity clarity and higher identity exploration, suggesting confusion in self-definition. Also, Andreassen et al. (2017) reported that high social media addiction scores correlate with low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation, and unstable self-identity.

In Table 3, results of the analyses indicate that there is no significant difference in the relationship between male and female undergraduate students in public universities in Edo State. Social media may exert similar psychological influences on both males and females, particularly concerning identity formation, self-image, and peer comparison. Both male and female students are likely exposed to the same academic, social, and media environments within the universities, potentially leading to similar identity-related experiences. The lack of significant gender difference suggests that social media-induced identity challenges are a shared experience among undergraduate students in Edo State. This reflects broader socio-cultural and technological changes where gender no longer strictly determines psychological responses to digital life. The finding of this study contradicts the findings of Agunbiade, Obiyan, and Sogbaike (2013) who found that female undergraduate students in Nigeria tend to rely more heavily on visual content, particularly photographs, to construct and communicate their identities online. The study of Egielewa, Unegbu, Ekele, and Tijani (2021) further showed that women, especially young women, are more active users of social media platforms compared to their male counterparts. However, the findings of Olowu and Seri (2012) reported that no significant gender difference was observed in students' psychological outcomes (including identity confusion) related to social media usage.

The result of this study in Table 4 revealed that economic status factors are positively associated with increased vulnerability to identity crisis via social media. Economically disadvantaged students may be frequently exposed to idealized lifestyles, wealth displays, and consumer culture on social media. This leads to upward social comparison, where users feel inferior, excluded, or ashamed of their socioeconomic status. The discrepancy between online ideals and personal reality can trigger identity confusion, low self-worth, and a fractured self-image. The finding agrees with the findings of Oyeboade (2017), who found that undergraduates from higher socio-economic backgrounds were significantly more likely to use multiple social media platforms and spend longer periods online. Further supporting this finding, Mancini and Nunez (2020) found that youth from low-income families were more likely to alter their online identities to appear wealthier or more desirable, which led to increased anxiety and identity confusion. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) also added that social comparison on Instagram predicted body dissatisfaction and identity confusion more strongly in participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The study reveals a significant relationship between social media usage and identity crisis among undergraduate students in public universities in Edo State. However, this relationship does not significantly differ between male and female students, indicating that both genders are equally affected. Additionally, students from lower economic backgrounds are more vulnerable to identity crises triggered or amplified by social media platforms.



Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. Universities should implement programs that help students critically engage with social media, understand its impact on self-perception, and build healthy online habits.
2. Counseling centers should prioritize identity-related issues, especially for students showing signs of distress linked to online experiences.
3. Since economic status is a risk factor, universities and stakeholders should offer mentorship, workshops, and financial empowerment programs aimed at boosting self-esteem and resilience in vulnerable students.
4. Educating families and communities on the psychological effects of social media can help create supportive environments outside school.

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