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Cognitive Mechanisms Linking Social Media Engagement to Depressive Moods Among Nigerian Undergraduates: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

Background

Social media use is pervasive among university students, but the cognitive pathways through which it may influence depressive mood are not well understood, particularly in low-resource settings. This study examined patterns of social media engagement, occurrence of depression, and lived experiences of depressive moods among Nigerian undergraduates, with a focus on cognitive mechanisms such as social comparison, automatic negative thoughts, and reappraisal.

Methods

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative phase: 417 undergraduates completed measures of social media engagement (SMEQ) and depression (PHQ-9). Qualitative phase: semi-structured interviews with 19 students were analyzed using thematic analysis, with a focus on cognitive processes.

Results

High social media engagement was reported by 89.7% of participants, yet most students (92.0%) had low depression scores. However, regression analysis showed that social media engagement significantly predicted depression ($B = 0.234$, $p < .001$). Qualitatively, students described upward social comparison as the primary cognitive trigger for depressive moods, generating automatic negative thoughts such as "I am falling behind" and "What am I doing wrong?" Rumination about online feedback (or lack thereof) and negative self-appraisal were common. Adaptive cognitive strategies included reappraisal ("social media does not reflect real life") and selective engagement, but professional help-seeking was rare.

Conclusions

While most students do not meet clinical depression criteria, social media engagement is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, and cognitive mechanisms—especially upward comparison and rumination—mediate this relationship. Interventions should target these cognitive processes (e.g., cognitive restructuring, reappraisal training) and reduce barriers to professional support.

Introduction

Social media platforms (WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok) have become central to the daily lives of university students, especially in low- and middle-income countries where smartphone penetration has risen rapidly. In Nigeria, undergraduates spend 3 to 7 hours

daily on social media (Montag & Hegelich, 2022). While social media can facilitate connection and information sharing, growing evidence links problematic use to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Keles et al., 2020; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2024). However, the cognitive mechanisms underlying these associations remain underexplored, particularly in culturally distinct, resource-constrained settings like Ekiti State, Nigeria, where mental health services are limited and stigma is high (Adewuya & Ola, 2023).

Cognitive Mechanisms of Interest

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a foundational framework: individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others. On social media, upward comparison (comparing with those perceived as better off) is frequent and can trigger automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) such as "I am not good enough" or "I am falling behind" (Fardouly et al., 2023). These ANTs, if repeated, may lead to rumination a repetitive, passive focus on symptoms of distress and their possible causes which is a well-established cognitive vulnerability for depression (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Conversely, cognitive reappraisal (reframing the meaning of a situation) may protect against depressive mood (Gross & John, 2003). Understanding how students spontaneously use (or fail to use) these cognitive strategies is critical for developing targeted interventions.

Gaps in the Literature

Most studies on social media and depression are cross-sectional, rely solely on quantitative measures, and come from high-income countries. Few have qualitatively explored the lived cognitive experiences of students as they engage with social media. Moreover, the pathway from social media engagement to clinical depression is likely not direct but mediated by cognitive processes—yet these mediators are rarely measured directly.

Objectives

This study had three objectives:

To examine patterns of social media engagement among undergraduates in Ekiti State.

To determine the occurrence of depression among these students.

To explore undergraduates' lived experiences of depressive moods related to social media use, with a specific focus on cognitive mechanisms (social comparison, automatic negative thoughts, rumination, reappraisal).

We used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to first quantify engagement and depression, then to understand the cognitive and emotional meanings behind those numbers.

Methods

Design and Setting

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The study was conducted at three universities in Ekiti State, Nigeria: Ekiti State University (public, state), Federal University Oye-Ekiti (public, federal), and Afe Babalola University (private). These represent the full spectrum of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Quantitative Phase

Participants and Sampling

The target population was 47,270 undergraduates. Sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula (95% confidence, 5% margin of error, 10% attrition), yielding 420 participants. A multistage sampling technique was used: purposive (selection of universities), stratified random (selection of faculties and departments), and convenience (selection of available students). The final sample size was N = 417.

Measures

Social media engagement: An adapted Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ) with 13 items on a 5-point Likert scale was used. A sample item is "Using social media is my daily habit." Cronbach's alpha was 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.

Depression: The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke et al., 2001) was used. Scores range from 0 to 27, with higher scores indicating more depressive symptoms. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered via Google Forms in lecture settings after obtaining informed consent. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and linear regression were computed.

Qualitative Phase

Participants

A purposive sample of 19 students (14 female, 5 male; mean age 20.3 years) who had high social media engagement and reported some emotional distress in the survey was selected.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore cognitive experiences, including:

"What thoughts go through your mind when you see others' achievements on social media?"

"Do you ever compare yourself with others online? Can you describe that process?"

"How do you try to manage negative feelings that come from social media?"

Interviews lasted 7 to 10 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted with a focus on identifying cognitive processes (comparison, automatic thoughts, rumination, reappraisal). Two researchers independently coded transcripts; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Saturation was reached at 19 interviews.

Integration

Quantitative and qualitative findings were compared for convergence, complementarity, and divergence (triangulation).

Ethics

Approval was obtained from the ethics committees of the three universities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout.

Results

Quantitative Results

Participant Characteristics (N = 417)

The mean age of participants was 20.8 years (SD = 2.6); 78.4% were female; 97.8% were single; and 46.3% were in 400 level. WhatsApp was the most used platform (42.7%), followed by TikTok (24.5%). Nearly half (47.0%) used social media six or more times per

day; 48.9% spent between 30 minutes and 2 hours per day on social media; and 89.7% had high overall social media engagement.

Patterns of Social Media Engagement (Objective 1)

High habitual use was reported: 60.2% agreed that "Using social media is my daily habit"; 80.1% browsed whenever they had time; and 77.9% used social media to relax. However, only 22.1% felt anxious when unable to use social media, and 29.0% found it difficult to reduce their use.

Occurrence of Depression (Objective 2)

Most participants (92.0%) had low PHQ-9 scores (below the clinical cutoff). For example:

68.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel sad after comparing themselves to others.

66.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel anxious seeing others' achievements.

72.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed about losing interest in activities due to social media.

Nevertheless, regression analysis showed that social media engagement significantly predicted depression ($B = 0.234$, $t = 5.074$, $F = 25.746$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher engagement was associated with higher depression scores, even though most scores remained low.

Qualitative Results (Objective 7 – Cognitive Focus)

Four major themes related to cognitive mechanisms emerged from the qualitative analysis.

Theme 1: Upward Social Comparison as the Primary Cognitive Trigger

Participants consistently described automatic, often involuntary, comparisons with peers and influencers.

"I followed an influencer and thought she was older than me. Then I saw that she was just 20 years old... it made me start thinking about what exactly I was doing wrong." (Participant 3)

"Seeing classmates who have graduated... made me feel very bad at times." (Participant 18)

These comparisons were not deliberate but appeared as spontaneous cognitive events, consistent with automatic negative thoughts.

Theme 2: Automatic Negative Thoughts and Self-Doubt

Following upward comparison, students reported specific, repetitive negative thoughts:

"You see your mates showing their houses, cars, and phones online... and you begin to wonder what exactly you are doing with your life." (Participant 5)

"When I saw that the influencer was the same age as me, I started thinking about what exactly I was doing wrong." (Participant 3)

Some participants described rumination—repeatedly dwelling on these thoughts:

"Sometimes when you see young people of your age moving forward and doing things, it can make you start thinking about your own life." (Participant 5)

Theme 3: Cognitive and Behavioral Responses to Negative Thoughts

Students used several cognitive strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive.

Adaptive – Cognitive reappraisal:

"I remind myself that most things posted on social media do not reflect real life." (Multiple participants)

Adaptive – Selective engagement (environmental control):

"I mute, unfollow, or block accounts that make me feel anxious, inadequate, or upset." (Multiple participants)

Maladaptive – Rumination and withdrawal:

"Sleep is affected; sometimes I think or cry at 3–4 a.m." (Participant 16)

"Social withdrawal occurs; I sometimes keep to myself due to things I've seen online." (Participant 17)

Theme 4: Extreme Cognitive Distress and the Absence of Professional Reappraisal Support

One participant reported a severe cognitive-affective cascade leading to suicidal ideation:

"There was a time I almost committed suicide due to the emotional pressure from comparing my life situation with others online." (Participant 18)

Notably, even this participant did not seek professional help; instead, family intervened. This highlights a critical gap in access to cognitive-behavioral support.

Integration: Quantitative and Qualitative Convergence and Divergence

Quantitative and qualitative findings converged on the importance of social comparison as a correlate of depression. However, they diverged on severity: most quantitative scores were low, yet qualitative narratives revealed clinically relevant cognitive distress (including near-suicidal ideation). This suggests that standard measures may underestimate episodic, cognition-driven depressive moods that do not reach full diagnostic thresholds.

Discussion

This mixed-methods study examined social media engagement, depression, and cognitive mechanisms among Nigerian undergraduates. Three main findings stand out, with a focus on cognitive processes.

First, social media engagement was near-ubiquitous and highly habitual (89.7% high engagement), consistent with studies from other Nigerian universities (Tayo et al., 2019; Ciroma et al., 2025). However, problematic use (anxiety when unable to use, difficulty reducing use) was less common, suggesting that most students are heavy but not addicted users.

Second, most students did not report clinical levels of depression on the PHQ-9 (92.0% low scores). This aligns with studies showing that routine social media use, without additional vulnerabilities, is a weak predictor of major depression (Twenge et al., 2018; Thorisdottir et al., 2020). Yet social media engagement still significantly predicted depression in regression analysis, indicating a small but reliable statistical effect. The discrepancy between low mean scores and a significant prediction is typical when the relationship is modest and distributed across a wide range.

Third, and most importantly for cognitive theory, qualitative findings revealed that upward social comparison triggers automatic negative thoughts ("What am I doing wrong?"), which can escalate into rumination and, in rare cases, suicidal ideation. This pattern directly supports Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and extends it into the digital context. The finding that students spontaneously use cognitive reappraisal ("social media does not reflect real life") is consistent with Gross's model of emotion regulation (Gross & John, 2003) and suggests that many students possess intuitive cognitive coping skills. However, the rarity of professional help-seeking indicates that these intuitive strategies are often insufficient for those with severe distress.

Comparison with Prior Cognitive Research

Our findings mirror those of studies on upward comparison and depression in other populations. For example, Vogel et al. (2014) found that upward comparison on Facebook led to decreased self-esteem and increased negative affect, mediated by rumination. Similarly, Feinstein et al. (2013) showed that upward social comparison on social media was associated with depressive symptoms among young adults. The present study adds qualitative depth by capturing the content of automatic thoughts ("What am I doing wrong?") and the process of rumination ("thinking about your own life") in students' own words.

Implications for Cognitive Therapy and Intervention

Clinical assessment: Practitioners should assess not only time spent on social media but also specific cognitive responses: frequency of upward comparison, automatic negative thoughts, and rumination. Brief measures such as the Social Comparison Orientation Scale (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007) could be integrated into intake assessments.

Cognitive restructuring: Therapists can help patients identify and challenge automatic thoughts triggered by social media (e.g., "Is it true that everyone else is more successful?" "What evidence contradicts that thought?"). Behavioral experiments (e.g., taking a break from a triggering platform and monitoring mood) could test the link between comparison and negative affect.

Reappraisal training: Psychoeducation about the curated nature of social media content ("the highlight reel effect") can be framed as a cognitive reappraisal strategy. Group workshops on digital literacy could teach students to actively reframe comparison thoughts.

Rumination focus: Given that rumination was reported, interventions such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) or rumination-focused CBT (RFCBT) could be adapted for university counseling centers (Watkins, 2016).

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths include the mixed-methods design, large quantitative sample, qualitative depth, and explicit focus on cognitive mechanisms. Limitations include the cross-sectional design (cannot establish causality), self-report measures (recall and social desirability biases), and the qualitative sample limited to one Nigerian region. Additionally, we did not directly measure rumination or reappraisal with validated scales; future studies should include such measures.

Future Research Directions

Use ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to capture real-time cognitive responses (automatic thoughts, reappraisal attempts) immediately after social media use.

Test whether a brief cognitive-behavioral intervention targeting upward comparison reduces depressive symptoms in Nigerian university students.

Examine whether cultural factors (e.g., collectivism, religious beliefs) moderate the relationship between social comparison and depression.

Conclusion

Among Nigerian undergraduates, social media use is highly prevalent but does not inevitably lead to major depression. However, engagement significantly predicts depressive symptoms, and cognitive mechanisms particularly upward social comparison, automatic negative thoughts, and rumination mediate this relationship. Students spontaneously use reappraisal and selective engagement, but professional help-seeking is minimal. Universities should integrate cognitive-behavioral skills (e.g., reappraisal training, rumination-focused strategies) into mental health services, while reducing stigma and access barriers.

Declarations

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Tables

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics and social media usage of respondents (N = 417)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	15–20	218	52.3
Mean ± SD =	21–26	183	43.9
20.80 ± 2.60	27–32	16	3.8
Gender	Male	90	21.6
	Female	327	78.4
Level of Study	100 Level	107	25.7
	200 Level	31	7.4
	300 Level	69	16.5
	400 Level	193	46.3
	500 Level	17	4.1
Faculty/Department	Basic Medical Sciences	185	44.4
	Arts	78	11.5
	Physical Sciences	50	4.8
	Management Sciences	37	1.7
	Social Sciences	33	0.7
	Sciences & Agriculture	34	1.0
Marital Status	Single	408	97.8
	Married	9	2.2
Most Engaged Social Media Platform	WhatsApp	173	41.5
	TikTok	102	24.5
	Facebook	31	7.4
	Instagram	29	7.0
	Twitter	19	4.6
	Snapchat	15	3.6
	YouTube	3	0.7
	Others (Telegram, LinkedIn, Reddit)	13	3.1
	WhatsApp & TikTok	24	5.8

	WhatsApp & Facebook	8	1.9
Frequency of Social Media Use (Past Month)	Less than once a week	20	4.8
	2–3 times a day	105	25.2
	4–5 times a day	96	23.0
	6 or more times a day	196	47.0
Daily Time Spent on Social Media	Less than 30 minutes	30	7.2
	30 minutes – 2 hours	204	48.9
	2–6 hours	101	24.2
	6–12 hours	82	19.7
Years of Social Media Use	Less than 3 years	73	17.5
	4–5 years	160	38.4
	8–9 years	92	22.1
	10 years or more	92	22.1
Number of Social Media Friends	Less than 50	98	23.5
	51–100	90	21.6
	101–150	29	7.0
	151–200	40	9.6
	More than 200	160	38.4

Table 2: Respondents' social media use behaviour (N = 417)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Using social media is my daily habit	39 (9.4)	41 (9.8)	86 (20.6)	173 (41.5)	78 (18.7)
I browse social media whenever I have time	18 (4.3)	28 (6.7)	37 (8.9)	243 (58.3)	91 (21.8)
Even if it is late, I check social media before sleeping	36 (8.6)	73 (17.5)	82 (19.7)	159 (38.1)	67 (16.1)
I often use social media as a way to relax	17 (4.1)	32 (7.7)	43 (10.3)	240 (57.6)	85 (20.4)
I feel fulfilled by the attention and comments I receive on social media	50 (12.0)	86 (20.6)	123 (29.5)	125 (30.0)	33 (7.9)
Support and encouragement from others on social media are important to me	46 (11.0)	70 (16.8)	154 (36.9)	115 (27.6)	32 (7.7)
Through social media, I am satisfied with my relationships with friends	40 (9.6)	78 (18.7)	141 (33.8)	130 (31.2)	28 (6.7)
Compared to the real world, social media makes me feel more comfortable	48 (11.5)	93 (22.3)	110 (26.4)	126 (30.2)	40 (9.6)
I feel bored when I cannot use social media	43 (10.3)	87 (20.9)	92 (22.1)	143 (34.3)	52 (12.5)
Compared to the real world, I feel happier when I socialize on social media	45 (10.8)	103 (24.7)	115 (27.6)	117 (28.1)	37 (8.9)
I feel anxious when I cannot use social media	90 (21.6)	149 (35.7)	86 (20.6)	68 (16.3)	24 (5.8)
I feel a strong urge to check social media when I have not used it for some time	36 (8.6)	81 (19.4)	67 (16.1)	175 (42.0)	58 (13.9)
I find it difficult to reduce the amount of time I spend on social media	74 (17.7)	146 (35.0)	76 (18.2)	103 (24.7)	18 (4.3)

A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree, N: Neutral

Table 3: Occurrence of depression among respondents (N=417)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
I feel sad or down after comparing myself to others on social media	135 (32.4)	149 (35.7)	75 (18.0)	45 (10.8)	13 (3.1)
I feel anxious or stressed when I see posts about others' achievements or lifestyles	119 (28.5)	159 (38.1)	85 (20.4)	43 (10.3)	11 (2.6)
I have lost interest in activities I normally enjoy because of the time spent on social media	117 (28.1)	187 (44.8)	60 (14.4)	47 (11.3)	6 (1.4)
I feel worthless or inadequate after browsing social media	179 (42.9)	176 (42.2)	39 (9.4)	16 (3.8)	7 (1.7)
I feel lonelier after using social media than before	149 (35.7)	182 (43.6)	48 (11.5)	28 (6.7)	10 (2.4)
I have trouble sleeping or concentrating because of social media use	162 (38.8)	164 (39.3)	52 (12.5)	28 (6.7)	11 (2.6)
I feel irritable or frustrated after interacting with content or people on social media	156 (37.4)	176 (42.2)	54 (12.9)	25 (6.0)	6 (1.4)
I think about negative things related to myself or my life while using social media	174 (41.7)	150 (36.0)	55 (13.2)	23 (5.5)	15 (3.6)
I have felt hopeless or depressed linked to my social media use	184 (44.1)	156 (37.4)	49 (11.8)	20 (4.8)	8 (1.9)
I feel that my mood is worse after using social media than before	186 (44.6)	161 (38.6)	40 (9.6)	21 (5.0)	9 (2.2)
I feel pressured to keep up with what others are doing on social media, which affects my mood	172 (41.2)	159 (38.1)	49 (11.8)	22 (5.3)	15 (3.6)
I feel that social media negatively affects my overall mental wellbeing	170 (40.8)	148 (35.5)	57 (13.7)	32 (7.7)	10 (2.4)

A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly disagree, N: Neutral

Qualitative analysis

Table 13: Themes and subthemes evolving from the qualitative strand

Theme	Subthemes
Theme 1: Emotional Responses to Social Media	1. Sadness, low mood, and emotional drain
	2. Anger and frustration due to societal issues
	3. Demoralization from criticism or negative feedback
	4. Extreme emotional responses
Theme 2: Triggers of Negative Emotions	1. Comparison with peers, influencers, or life milestones
	2. Negative comments, criticism, and body-shaming
	3. Lack of engagement on personal posts
	4. Exposure to sensitive or distressing content
Theme 3: Impact on Daily Undergraduate Life	1. Academic distraction and decreased focus
	2. Sleep disturbances
	3. Social withdrawal or emotional distancing
	4. Mood swings and emotional instability
	5. Minimal impact in some cases
Theme 4: Influence on Self-Perception and Self-Worth	1. Low self-esteem and inadequacy
	2. Pressure to meet social or peer expectations
	3. Self-doubt and questioning achievements
	4. Minimal effect when comparison is absent
Theme 5: Coping Strategies	1. Taking breaks or disengaging from social media
	2. Distraction and engagement in hobbies
	3. Seeking social support
	4. Spiritual support and self-reflection
	5. Professional support
Theme 6: Dual Role of Social Media	1. Positive roles of social media

2. Negative roles of social media