

Social Media Use and Digital Wellbeing among Nubi Adults in Uganda: A Correlational Analysis of Behavioural and Psychosocial Outcomes

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed communication practices globally, particularly among young adults in developing countries. Among ethnic minority populations such as the Nubi community in Uganda—a historically marginalized group with distinct cultural and linguistic identities—social media may serve both as a tool for cultural preservation and a source of psychosocial risk. This study examined the relationship between social media use patterns and digital wellbeing among young Nubi adults in Uganda. A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was employed involving 204 respondents from the Nubi community, with 201 valid cases analysed. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering demographic characteristics, usage behaviours, and psychosocial wellbeing indicators. Spearman's rho correlation was used to determine relationships among variables. Findings indicate that intensive and habitual social media use is significantly associated with sleep disruption, reduced physical activity, emotional distress, and increased self-consciousness, consistent with the displacement hypothesis (Nie, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Compulsive usage behaviours—such as difficulty controlling usage, habitual checking, and emotional reliance—were strongly interrelated, reflecting behavioural addiction frameworks (Andreassen, 2015). Cyberbullying exposure and negative online feedback were significantly associated with psychological distress and self-image concerns, aligning with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). However, engagement with mental health-related content and culturally affirming Nubi online spaces demonstrated positive associations with life satisfaction and perceived wellbeing. The study concludes that social media use operates as a dual-edged phenomenon among Nubi adults, producing both psychosocial risks and benefits depending on usage patterns and cultural context. Policy and intervention strategies should prioritise digital literacy, behavioural self-regulation, culturally sensitive mental health awareness, and community-based online safety initiatives.

Keywords: Social Media; Digital Wellbeing; Mental Health; Nubi Adults; Uganda; Behavioural Addiction; Cyberbullying; Ethnic Minority.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central to everyday communication among young adults. In Sub-Saharan Africa, increased smartphone penetration and affordable internet access have accelerated digital integration into social life [1]. Social media offers unique opportunities among ethnically minoritized

groups for identity expression, community building, and counter-narrative development [2], [3].

The Nubi community in Uganda who are descendants of Sudanese soldiers who served in the colonial King's African Rifles constitute a historically marginalized ethnic group with distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural practices [4], [5]. Despite their long presence in Uganda, Nubis have faced systemic marginalization, land dispossession, and limited

access to education and economic opportunities [6]. For such communities, digital spaces may function as sites of cultural resilience, yet they also introduce novel psychosocial vulnerabilities.

While early literature emphasized the democratizing and connective potential of social media, recent scholarship increasingly highlights its psychological and behavioural risks, including anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and reduced attention span [7], [8]. Social media use among ethnic minority populations is further complicated by acculturative stress, dual identity negotiation, and exposure to online discrimination [9], [10].

Existing literature suggests that excessive social media use is associated with anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and reduced productivity [7], [8]. The displacement hypothesis argues that time spent online may replace essential offline activities such as sleep, physical exercise, and face-to-face interaction [11], [12].

Conversely, the uses and gratifications theory argues that individuals actively use media to satisfy emotional and social needs [13]. For minority adults like the Nubi, these needs may include ethnic identity affirmation, in-group connection, and resistance to dominant cultural narratives [14], [15]. This dual theoretical tension frames social media as both beneficial and potentially harmful depending on patterns of use and cultural context [16].

Despite increasing digital adoption in Uganda, empirical evidence on the psychosocial implications of social media use among specific ethnic minority groups such as the Nubi adults remains virtually absent. This study therefore investigates how usage patterns relate to digital wellbeing outcomes among Nubi adults, with a focus on behavioural, emotional, and physical dimensions.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was adopted to examine statistical relationships among variables without manipulation, a design well-suited for preliminary explorations of psychosocial phenomena in under-researched populations [17].

B. Population and Sample

The study targeted adult social media users from the Nubi community in Uganda. A total of 204 respondents participated, with 201 valid responses retained for analysis after data cleaning. This sample size exceeds the minimum required for detecting moderate correlations at $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.80 [18]. Participants were recruited through community-based organisations, Nubi cultural associations, and snowball sampling to reach a historically hard-to-access population [19].

C. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from validated digital wellbeing scales, including the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale [20] and the Digital Wellbeing Scale [21]. The instrument was culturally adapted for Nubi respondents through consultation with community elders and pilot testing. The instrument measured demographic characteristics like age, gender, education, and employment; Nubi identity affiliation, and social media usage patterns including frequency, duration, purpose, platforms, and engagement with Nubi-specific content, behavioural indicators not confined to habit formation, sleep disruption, multitasking, and psychosocial outcomes involving stress, cyberbullying exposure, self-perception, life satisfaction, and ethnic identity affirmation.

D. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was applied due to the ordinal nature of several variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$.

E. Reliability Analysis

The instrument yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.696 across the 40 items of this study, indicating acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research [22]. The multidimensional nature of constructs seems to have likely contributed to the marginally lower reliability coefficient, as alpha is sensitive to scale dimensionality [23].

III. RESULTS

A. Demographic Influences on Social Media Use

Descriptive analysis indicated moderate diversity in age distribution and relatively low variability in gender representation among Nubi adult respondents. Most respondents fell within lower-to-middle education and employment categories, reflecting historical patterns of educational and economic marginalisation affecting the Nubi community in Uganda [6]. This suggests differential access to digital resources, a pattern consistent with the digital divide literature that disproportionately affects ethnic minorities [24]. Internet access was primarily mobile-data driven due to low Wi-Fi availability in most parts of the country, hence shaping usage patterns and intensity.

Overall social media engagement was moderate, with respondents reporting varied purposes including communication, entertainment, information seeking, and engagement with Nubi cultural content. However, habitual behaviours such as checking social media upon waking and during meals were evident, reflecting automaticity in media consumption [25].

The study revealed that age was significantly associated with multiple usage behaviours. Younger Nubi respondents reported higher daily usage, while older respondents exhibited

more habitual engagement patterns such as checking social media upon waking and during nighttime hours, consistent with findings that behavioural automaticity increases with longer digital exposure histories [26].

Gender and education also showed significant associations with behavioural and psychological outcomes. The study showed that higher education levels were negatively associated with emotional reliance on social media, suggesting improved self-regulation and media literacy [27]. Notably, Nubi adults who actively sought out and engaged with Nubi language content and Nubi cultural pages reported higher levels of ethnic identity affirmation, consistent with literature on digital ethnic media use [28].

B. Intensity and Patterns of Social Media Use

Sleep disruption emerged as a key outcome variable of the research. Night-time usage, early morning checking, and screen exposure before sleep were significantly associated with fatigue, headaches, and reduced sleep quality among the Nubi respondents. These findings align with experimental evidence that blue light exposure suppresses melatonin production and delays circadian rhythms [29].

Higher social media usage was significantly associated with sleep disruption, fatigue, and reduced physical activity, supporting the displacement hypothesis [11]. Connections were also found with missed academic or work responsibilities and increased emotional distraction, echoing concerns about task-switching costs and attentional fragmentation [30].

The respondents' habitual behaviours such as checking social media immediately upon waking and using it before sleep formed a consistent behavioural cluster, indicating emerging compulsive engagement patterns.

C. Problematic and Compulsive Use Patterns

The study revealed strong interrelationships among indicators of behavioural dependency, including difficulty reducing usage, restlessness when offline, continued use despite negative mood effects, and habitual checking behaviour. These findings suggest a reinforcing cycle of compulsive engagement consistent with behavioural addiction frameworks [31], [32]. These patterns resemble substance use disorders in their manifestation of salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse [32].

Compulsive use among Nubi adults was moderately correlated with perceived discrimination in offline contexts, suggesting that some may use social media as an escape from acculturative stress, a pattern documented among other minority groups [33], [34].

D. Psychosocial Outcomes

It was observed that cyberbullying exposure was significantly associated with emotional distress and self-consciousness among Nubi adults, consistent with longitudinal

evidence linking online victimisation to internalising problems [35]. Remarkably, a subset of respondents reported experiencing cyberbullying specifically targeting their Nubi ethnic identity including derogatory comments about Nubi heritage, language, or historical stereotypes. This finding aligns with research on race-based and ethnicity-based online harassment [36], [37].

Secondly, social comparison behaviours were strongly linked to perceived social pressure and reduced self-esteem. According to Festinger's social comparison theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others; curated online environments intensify upward comparisons, leading therefore to diminished self-worth [38], [39]. For Nubi adults, comparisons with dominant ethnic groups such as the Baganda, Banyankole and others portrayed in mainstream Ugandan media may exacerbate feelings of marginalisation. These results indicate that curated online environments intensify identity-related stress and psychological vulnerability, particularly for ethnic minority adults navigating dual cultural frames [10].

E. Sleep and Physical Health Effects

It was revealed that night-time social media use was significantly associated with sleep disruption, nocturnal awakenings, and fatigue. Physical symptoms such as headaches and eye strain were also reported, consistent with digital eye strain literature [40]. Reduced physical activity was linked to prolonged screen exposure, indicating lifestyle displacement effects that may contribute to long-term cardiometabolic risks [41]. Among Nubi adults, who already face disproportionate health disparities due to socioeconomic marginalisation [6], these displacement effects may compound existing vulnerabilities.

F. Wellbeing and Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was negatively associated with difficulty controlling social media use, while positively associated with engagement in mental health awareness content and participation in online Nubi cultural spaces. This suggests that the impact of social media is highly dependent on usage patterns and content exposure, a finding that aligns with the differential susceptibility to media effects model [12], [42]. For Nubi adults, culturally affirming digital spaces may serve as protective factors, buffering against the negative effects of mainstream media representation and offline discrimination [15], [28].

IV. DISCUSSION

The study's findings demonstrate that social media use among Nubi adults in Uganda is embedded within a complex behavioural and psychological system rather than functioning as an isolated activity. The strong relationship between usage intensity and sleep disruption supports the displacement hypothesis [11], [12], which suggests that digital engagement replaces essential daily routines.

Habitual behaviours such as night-time checking and immediate morning use indicate the formation of automatic usage patterns that may reduce self-regulation capacity [25]. The interdependence of variables such as restlessness, emotional distraction, and difficulty reducing use reflects behavioural dependency tendencies consistent with Griffiths' six-component model of addiction [32].

Social media appears to function as an emotional regulation tool, particularly in response to stress or negative mood states, including experiences of ethnic discrimination and reinforcing continuous engagement cycles through negative reinforcement mechanisms [43], [34]. Consistent associations between social comparison, self-consciousness, and perceived pressure align with social comparison theory [38]. For Nubi adults, comparisons with members of dominant ethnic groups on social media may intensify feelings of cultural inadequacy and historical marginalisation, consistent with the concept of social identity threat [44].

Cyberbullying emerged as a significant predictor of emotional distress, with ethnicity-based online harassment producing particularly strong effects. Even when prevalence is relatively low, its psychological impact is substantial, indicating that exposure intensity matters more than frequency alone, a finding that supports the asymmetric impact hypothesis [45]. The findings confirm that digital engagement, particularly at night, disrupts sleep cycles and contributes to fatigue, aligning with evidence that screen exposure affects circadian rhythm regulation via melatonin-suppressing blue light [29].

Engagement with mental health awareness content and deliberate usage control strategies were associated with improved wellbeing outcomes. Participation in Nubi cultural and linguistic online spaces was associated with higher life satisfaction, suggesting that digital environments can support ethnic identity development and collective self-esteem [46], [28]. This highlights the importance of digital literacy and intentional media consumption in mitigating adverse effects, supporting the uses and gratifications framework [13] and extending it to the context of ethnic minority mental health.

A key finding is the paradox of age-related usage patterns. While younger Nubi users spend more time online, older users exhibit more habitual and intrusive behaviours such as night-time checking. This supports the view that digital dependency is behavioural rather than age-specific, with habit strength accumulating over years of use [26].

Cyberbullying, particularly ethnicity-based online harassment, emerged as a significant predictor of psychological harm, consistent with findings by Patchin and Hinduja [35] and meta-analytic evidence linking cybervictimisation to depression [47]. Sleep disruption was one of the most consistent outcomes, aligning with Chang et al. [29] and Woods and Scott [48]. Importantly, not all social media engagement was

harmful. Engagement with mental health awareness content and culturally affirming Nubi digital spaces was positively associated with life satisfaction, supporting the uses and gratifications framework [13] and the concept of selective exposure to beneficial content [12], [42].

Overall, findings suggest that digital wellbeing among Nubi adults is shaped by usage behaviour, content exposure, and the interaction between online experiences and offline ethnic identity dynamics, requiring culturally responsive, multidimensional intervention strategies.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media use among Nubi adults in Uganda is associated with both positive and negative digital wellbeing outcomes, confirming its dual-edged nature [16]. While moderate use, particularly engagement with culturally affirming Nubi content and mental health resources, may provide psychosocial benefits, excessive and uncontrolled engagement is linked to emotional distress, sleep disruption, and functional impairment.

The findings highlight that the key issue is not merely the amount of social media use, but the pattern, purpose, psychological context of engagement, and cultural relevance of content consumed. For historically marginalized groups such as Uganda's Nubi community, social media simultaneously presents risks including but not limited to ethnic cyberbullying, upward social comparison with dominant groups and opportunities such as cultural affirmation, community building, counter-narrative development).

The findings highlight the need for integrated, culturally sensitive interventions focusing on (1) digital literacy and responsible use tailored for ethnic minority adults [27]; (2) mental health awareness in online spaces that acknowledges acculturative stress and ethnic identity dynamics; (3) behavioural self-regulation strategies [25]; (4) awareness of ethnicity-based cyberbullying risks and reporting mechanisms [33]; and (5) promotion of culturally affirming digital content and online community spaces.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships, explore platform-specific effects on mental health outcomes, and qualitatively investigate how Nubi adults negotiate ethnic identity in digital spaces. Comparative studies between Nubi adults and other Ugandan ethnic groups would further illuminate the role of minority status in shaping digital wellbeing.

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