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## Strategies Employed by Undergraduate Students at the University of Nairobi to Maintain Psychological Well-being Amid Excessive Social Media Use

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### Abstract

This study examines coping strategies employed by University of Nairobi students to maintain psychological well-being amidst excessive social media use. Social media's pervasive role has prompted students to mitigate its adverse mental health effects. The study used a mixed-methods design, targeting 1,200 undergraduates. A stratified random sample consisting of 300 students was chosen using Cochran's (1977) formula, and 20 students were purposively chosen for two focus group discussions (FGDs). Data were collected via structured questionnaires with closed-ended and Likert scale questions and FGDs to explore lived experiences. Quantitative data were examined utilising SPSS to perform descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings reveal that students use digital detoxification, time management, and offline activities to regulate social media use. Setting app limits, taking breaks, and disabling notifications reduces distractions. Mindfulness, exercise, and hobbies counter stress and anxiety from prolonged online engagement. Peer, family, and counselling support aid those with social media dependency. Curating online environments by unfollowing negative content and joining supportive communities improves mental health. However, some struggle with self-regulation due to social media's addictive nature. The study emphasises institutional support for digital literacy and mental health education to promote responsible social media use. Universities can empower students to balance digital lifestyles, reducing psychological burdens while maximising benefits.

**Key words:** Excessive social media use, psychological well-being, strategies, undergraduate students.



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## INTRODUCTION

The integration of social media into daily life has profoundly transformed how university students engage with each other, access information, and manage their psychological well-being. Social platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and X (Formerly Twitter) have become integral tools for socialisation, learning, and self-expression. However, while these platforms offer significant benefits, their excessive use has been linked to various adverse psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and stress (Woods & Scott, 2016; Lin et al., 2016). The pressure to uphold an idealised online identity and the constant need for validation through likes, comments, and followers have intensified mental health concerns among students (Keles et al., 2020). Furthermore, the shift from face-to-face interactions to virtual engagement has exacerbated feelings of loneliness, self-comparison, and diminished self-esteem, all of which contribute to dissatisfaction with life (Hall et al., 2023).

Due to these challenges, university students have developed various coping mechanisms to maintain their psychological well-being while managing excessive social media use. Techniques such as effective time management, digital detoxification, and engaging in offline social activities have emerged as important strategies for mitigating the negative impact of social media on mental health (Yang, 2022; Walsh, 2017). Additionally, universities have increasingly recognised the need to address these issues and have implemented educational programs and counselling services designed to help students navigate their social media habits in a healthier way. However, despite these efforts, many students continue to struggle with managing the psychological effects of social media, indicating that existing support systems may not be fully effective.

The problem of excessive social media use among university students has reached a point where it significantly affects their mental well-being and academic performance. Although some coping strategies have been identified, there remains a lack of comprehensive research on the specific techniques that students use to manage the mental health challenges associated with social media. The role of universities in fostering healthy digital habits through institutional support is also underexplored. This research aims to address this deficiency by examining the coping strategies employed by students at the University of

Nairobi to mitigate the psychological stress caused by social media, assessing the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting mental well-being, and examining the role of institutional support in encouraging healthier social media use among students. By achieving these aims, this research will provide important insights into the creation of more effective interventions to help students better manage their social media consumption and mental health.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both university policies and mental health interventions. By identifying and analysing the coping strategies that students adopt, the findings will help universities implement targeted programs to support students in managing their digital habits. Furthermore, the research will offer insights into how educational institutions can contribute to fostering a balanced relationship with social media, thereby reducing its negative psychological effects and enhancing students' overall well-being.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The shift from adolescence to early adulthood represents an essential phase in the development of identity, frequently associated with a heightened susceptibility to mental health issues, particularly depression. During this stage, young people encounter various stressors related to academic pressures, social dynamics, and the complexities of emerging adulthood. Despite the prevalence of these challenges, barriers such as stigma, cost, and lack of awareness prevent many individuals from seeking mental health care. As a result, social media has become a significant outlet for young individuals to express emotions such as stress, frustration, and anxiety, which can contribute to depressive symptoms (Kross et al., 2013). However, social media has both positive and negative aspects; while it can exacerbate mental health issues, it also holds potential as a platform for mental health interventions, helping users cope with psychological distress.

Research indicates that social media can be an effective tool for increasing mental health awareness and providing accessible support. Ridout and Campbell (2018) suggest that social networking sites offer an engaging and readily accessible means of mental health support, leading to increased awareness and reductions in depression symptoms among youth. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of online interventions in

improving mental health outcomes. For example, Deady et al. (2016) found that an automated web-based self-help program effectively reduced alcohol consumption and depressive symptoms in young individuals. Similarly, Naslund et al. (2019) highlighted the value of peer support through social media, noting that it helps individuals with psychiatric conditions combat loneliness and discover hope. Vornholt and De Choudhury (2021) emphasised that students struggling with depression and anxiety often turn to social media for emotional support, often preferring these platforms over seeking help from family members or mental health professionals. These results indicate that although social media has the potential to offer emotional relief, it can also contribute to stress and emotional distress, depending on how it is used.

Meta-analyses by Välimäki et al. (2016) provide further evidence of the benefits of digital interventions for mental health management. These studies highlight the positive impact of web-based psychoeducation, peer support groups, and virtual rehabilitation programs in alleviating symptoms of mental health disorders. In particular, a study by Ongeri et al. (2021) among Kenyan youths found that social media serves as a tool for self-discovery, private information-seeking, and socialisation, thus playing a dual role in both personal development and mental health support.

Even with the increasing amount of evidence highlighting the advantages of social media for mental health, there is a notable gap in region-specific research, especially within the Kenyan context. This research aims to address this deficiency by exploring the effectiveness of social media-based strategies to mitigate depression among university students, a population that is especially at risk of experiencing the mental health effects of excessive social media use.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are based on the Theory of Displaced Behaviour and Festinger's Social Comparison Theory. The Theory of Displaced Behaviour posits that sedentary activities, such as prolonged social media use, often replace face-to-face interactions and physical exercise, both of which are essential for maintaining mental health. Reduced physical activity and social isolation, associated with excessive social media use, can lead to heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress (LaRose et al., 2003). On the other hand, maintaining in-person interactions and

engaging in physical activities are known protective measures against these negative effects (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017).

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory provides further insight into how social media can negatively impact students' self-esteem and mental health. According to this theory, individuals often compare themselves to others, and social media exacerbates this tendency by showcasing idealised portrayals of others' lives. The need for validation through likes, comments, and shares can create a cycle of dependence on social media for self-worth, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015). However, students can counteract these negative effects by adopting strategies such as mindful social media use, digital detoxes, and focusing on real-life achievements, thus reducing the harmful impact of social comparison.

The conceptual framework of this research highlights the connection between the use of social media and mental health results, particularly concerning anxiety, low self-worth, and depressive symptoms. Understanding these interactions is essential in developing strategies that promote balanced social media engagement while protecting students' psychological well-being. Despite the substantial research on the detrimental effects of social media, there remains a critical gap in identifying practical, evidence-based strategies that encourage healthy and moderate social media use. This study seeks to address the gap in helping university students maintain their mental health and well-being as they navigate the complexities of excessive social media use.

## METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in this study to explore strategies university students employ to cope with excessive social media use. The research was conducted at the University of Nairobi, targeting undergraduate students across various disciplines to ensure a broad representation of student experiences. The research utilised a mixed-method approach, integrating structured surveys for quantitative information and focus group discussions (FGDs) for qualitative insights.

The target population comprised 1,200 undergraduate students from different academic departments. Using a stratified random sampling technique, 400 students were selected to participate in the survey. The sample size was

calculated using Cochran's (1977) formula for sample size determination, given the finite population size:

$$n = \frac{N \cdot Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{(E^2 \cdot (N - 1) + Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p))}$$

Where:

$n$

$n$  is the sample size

$N$

$N$  is the population size (1,200 students)

$Z$

$Z$  is the Z-value (1.96 for 95% confidence)

$p$

$p$  is the estimated proportion (0.5, representing maximum variability)

$E$

$E$  is the margin of error (5%)

This formula resulted in a total of 291 participants in the sample, which was then rounded up to 300 for better representation. Additionally, ten students were selected for the focus group discussions through purposive sampling, aiming to include individuals with varying experiences with social media addiction.

The data collection process involved a systematic approach to ensure comprehensive coverage of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study. Structured questionnaires were administered to a total of 300 student participants, selected through a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different academic levels and disciplines. These questionnaires were designed to capture measurable data on various coping strategies students adopt in response to excessive social media use, including patterns of behaviour, frequency of engagement with digital platforms, and personal regulation techniques. The design of the questionnaire incorporated both closed-ended and Likert scale questions to facilitate statistical analysis and comparison of trends.

Along with the survey, focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted as a qualitative component of the study to gain deeper, context-rich insights into students' lived experiences, motivations, and perspectives regarding excessive social media use and its associated psychological impacts. These discussions aimed to explore the nuances of behaviour and emotion that could

not be fully captured through the structured questionnaire. Two FGDs were organised, each comprising ten participants, making a total of twenty students. The participants were purposively selected according to predefined criteria, including their active engagement with social media platforms and their expressed willingness to candidly discuss their experiences. This approach guaranteed that individuals with varied social media habits and allowed for diverse viewpoints to emerge.

Each session was facilitated in a quiet and neutral environment within the university to promote open and comfortable interaction. A trained moderator guided the discussions using a semi-structured discussion guide that covered a range of relevant themes, such as emotional triggers for social media use, perceived benefits and drawbacks, peer influence, academic interference, self-esteem, and coping mechanisms. The moderator encouraged participants to build on each other's responses, fostering interactive and reflective dialogue that helped uncover both shared and individual experiences.

With participants' informed consent, the sessions were audio recorded, and detailed field notes were taken to ensure accuracy and depth of data capture. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim, preserving the original expressions and language used by the participants. These transcripts were subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, a methodical process for recognising, examining, and documenting trends (themes) within the data. Coding was conducted in multiple stages, beginning with initial open coding to capture emergent ideas, followed by axial coding to relate concepts and identify categories. Themes were developed around recurring concepts such as digital fatigue, social comparison, academic procrastination, emotional regulation, and self-imposed boundaries. This rigorous process ensured that the students' voices and lived experiences were comprehensively represented, adding significant depth and meaning to the quantitative findings.

The data analysis was conducted in two separate stages that align with the mixed-methods approach. For the quantitative data collected through the questionnaires, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilised to generate descriptive statistics. Key statistical measures such as frequency distributions, percentages,

and cross-tabulations were used to identify dominant coping behaviours and demographic trends. On the other hand, the qualitative data obtained from the FGDs were analysed thematically through a structured coding process. This involved identifying recurring patterns, grouping related responses, and categorising them into major themes that reflected the psychological and behavioural dimensions of social media addiction among students.

Ethical considerations were carefully implemented throughout the research process to ensure the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Informed consent was secured before data collection, with all participants being fully briefed on the nature, purpose, and voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, with all responses being recorded in a manner that did not reveal any personal identifiers. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing negative consequences. Furthermore, all data were securely stored in password-protected digital formats and restricted to the research team, thereby upholding the ethical standards of research integrity and participant protection.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Students use different strategies to cope with excessive social media use, ranging from engaging in offline activities to creating structured schedules for online engagement. These strategies are designed to maintain

psychological well-being and alleviate the harmful consequences of social media addiction.

Survey responses revealed several key strategies for managing excessive social media use. A significant 64.5 per cent of respondents recommended engaging in screen-free hobbies such as reading, exercising, or socialising offline for at least one hour each week. This approach was viewed as effective in reducing time spent on social media and fostering healthier offline activities. Similarly, 50.4 per cent of participants advocated for creating a structured social media usage schedule. By setting specific times for social media engagement, students can better regulate their online behaviour, reducing impulsive scrolling and time wastage.

Another popular strategy, endorsed by 57.9 per cent of participants, was adopting a phone-free policy during meals. This practice encourages mindfulness, enhances social interactions, and reduces distractions caused by phones during dining. In line with this, 57.9 per cent of students reported implementing time-restricted social media access, setting predefined windows for social media use to help prevent overuse and promote self-regulation. Furthermore, 36.4 per cent of respondents kept their phones outside their bedrooms, aiming to improve sleep hygiene and reduce late-night social media use, which can negatively affect sleep quality. A smaller but significant proportion, 34.7 per cent, recommended hiding social media apps from view to minimise impulsive engagement, making it less likely for students to fall into the trap of scrolling mindlessly.

**Table 1: Key Strategies for Managing Social Media Use**

Strategy	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Engaging in Screen-Free Hobbies	64.5
Creating a Structured Usage Schedule	50.4
Phone-Free Meals	57.9
Time-Restricted Social Media Access	57.9
Keeping Phones Outside Bedrooms	36.4
Hiding Social Media Apps	34.7

The focus group discussions provided deeper insights into students' experiences with social media addiction. Participants discussed the cultural and psychological drivers of excessive social media use, particularly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Peer pressure, fear of missing out (FOMO), and social comparison were cited as significant factors contributing to excessive screen time.

A third-year student, Sarah, shared, "Instagram and TikTok have become my escape, but I know it impacts my focus. Sometimes I end up scrolling for hours." Another student, Michael, a second-year, added, "I often compare myself to others on social media. It's hard not to feel like I'm falling behind." These quotes highlight the internal conflicts students' experience, as they simultaneously enjoy social media while being aware of



its negative impact on their well-being. Emily, a fourth-year student, further noted, "I've realised my grades have suffered because I procrastinate due to social media distractions." These personal accounts emphasise the dual nature of social media addiction, entertainment, and connection versus distraction and procrastination.

Participants suggested several coping strategies to address this issue. The majority stressed the importance of self-discipline in managing social media use. Several students also advocated for institutional support in the form of awareness campaigns, digital well-being workshops, and structured digital detox programs.

### Discussion

The results underscore the growing awareness among university students about the negative impact of excessive social media use and their desire to adopt strategies that promote a healthier balance between digital and offline life. Among the most common strategies, 64.5 per cent of respondents recommended engaging in screen-free hobbies for at least an hour each week, emphasising the value of offline activities in reducing screen time. Engaging in hobbies such as physical exercise, reading, or socialising without digital distractions serves as an effective way to manage social media addiction and promote a healthier lifestyle.

The creation of structured social media usage schedules (endorsed by 50.4% of participants) is another key strategy. This method encourages students to regulate their time spent on social media by allocating specific times for online engagement. This simple yet effective approach can help students prevent impulsive scrolling, maintain focus on academic tasks, and preserve mental well-being.

The phone-free meal policy, supported by 57.9 per cent of respondents, highlights the importance of reducing distractions during mealtimes. Students noted that having meals without their phones allowed for more meaningful social interactions and mindfulness, which contributed positively to their overall well-being. The widespread adoption of time-restricted social media access (also endorsed by 57.9% of students) further emphasises the value of setting boundaries around social media use to avoid overindulgence.

An alternative noteworthy strategy is keeping phones outside bedrooms, recommended by 36.4 per cent of

students. This tactic aims to improve sleep quality by preventing late-night social media use, which has been linked to disruption of sleep patterns and negatively affects mental health. Hiding social media apps, as suggested by 34.7 per cent of respondents, can serve as a simple yet effective method to reduce temptation and impulsive engagement with social media platforms.

The focus group discussions also revealed deeper psychological factors contributing to social media addiction. Peer influence and FOMO were commonly cited as driving forces behind students' constant need to stay connected. This aligns with Festinger's Social Comparison Theory, which suggests that individuals often evaluate themselves by comparing their lives to those of others, leading to anxiety, lower self-esteem, and greater social comparison.

Students also emphasised the role of universities in addressing the issue of social media addiction. They suggested that institutions could implement awareness campaigns, digital well-being workshops, and structured digital detox programs to help students navigate the challenges associated with excessive social media use.

The findings indicate that while social media addiction presents significant challenges to students' mental well-being, self-regulation strategies such as engaging in offline activities, setting structured schedules, and participating in digital detox programs can help mitigate these effects. The combination of personal responsibility and institutional support is key to fostering a healthier balance between the online and offline worlds. Future research could explore the long-term effectiveness of these coping strategies and assess the role of educational institutions in promoting digital well-being among students.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Conclusion:** The findings from this study provide significant insights into how students cope with excessive social media use. The study sought to determine the coping mechanisms employed by students and assess their effectiveness in encouraging a better balance between digital and real-life pursuits. Based on the comprehensive data collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study concludes that students engage in various self-regulatory strategies to reduce excessive social media use and maintain their psychological well-being. The research underscores the

importance of self-regulation in managing social media addiction and maintaining psychological well-being. By following these coping strategies and fostering a culture of self-discipline, students can achieve a healthier relationship with social media, leading to improved academic performance, enhanced social connections, and better mental well-being. A key finding of this research is the importance of engaging in screen-free hobbies, as indicated by 64.5 per cent of respondents. Offline activities such as reading, exercising, and socialising provide students with an effective outlet for reducing screen time and combating the psychological effects of prolonged social media use.

**Recommendations:** The study recommends creating a social media schedule, endorsed by 50.4 per cent of students, to promote self-regulation and reduce impulsive engagement. Additionally, adopting phone-free meals

(supported by 57.9% of respondents) encourages mindfulness and enhances social interactions. Time-restricted social media access, also recommended by 57.9 per cent of participants, helps avoid overuse. Other strategies include keeping phones outside of bedrooms (36.4% of students) to improve sleep hygiene and hiding social media apps (34.7%) to reduce impulsive engagement. The study highlights the need for institutional support, including awareness campaigns and digital well-being workshops, to encourage students to adopt these strategies and promote better self-regulation. Institutions should play a proactive role in offering programs and resources that promote digital well-being. Future research could explore the long-term impact of these strategies on students' mental health and academic performance, as well as the effectiveness of institutional initiatives aimed at reducing social media addiction.

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