

Young people and perceived achievements on social media: The needfulness of social work services in Nigerian tertiary schools

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Abstract: Material and non-material achievements are replete on social media, and they are perceived differently by people. We sought to provide evidence on how young undergraduates relate with these perceived achievements, the prospects and problems associated with such perceptions, and the implications for psychosocial support services in higher institutions in Nigeria. Guided by phenomenology, 30 young undergraduates across two universities in Nigeria were interviewed. Elicited data were analysed in themes, and identity theory provided the conceptual framework. Despite the positives taken from the perceived achievements on social media, there were considerable negative influences, affecting the character and esteem of young people. The students expressed interest in seeking psychosocial services, which were unavailable. Our study buttresses the need to mainstream social work and other psychosocial services in Nigerian tertiary schools for the comprehensive development of students.

Keywords: internet; self-valuation; social media; social work; tertiary education; Nigeria

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Introduction

Social media is a laudable invention. Its usefulness in easing communication and making opportunities available to people cannot be understated. With sophisticated mobile gadgets, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Snapchat, are now easily accessible (Fernandez et al, 2019; Pantic et al, 2012; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Although social media has benefitted the globe, there are concerns about its effects on people, especially teenagers and youth (Uko, 2015; The Guardian, 2017). An important aspect to consider is how young people perceive and react to social media content that conveys achievements, and the psychosocial supports that are available to them when such perceptions and reactions are unwholesome.

Nigeria has a fast-growing number of social media users. Currently, there are about 43 million social media users in the country, and the figure is predicted to rise to over 103 million by 2026 (Statista, 2021). Just like most parts of the world, young people dominate the social media space in Nigeria (Dean, 2021; NOI Polls, 2019), and are likely to spend over 60% of their daily 24 hours on diverse social media platforms (Plaisime et al, 2020; Uzuegbunam, 2015). Some studies have raised concerns about the unwholesome influences of social media on young people, especially in the areas of academic performance, values, and culture (Agwu et al, 2021; Allen & Mendick, 2012; Ngonso, 2019). The reactions of young people to posts on social media that portray achievements of people is an emerging concern (Malik & Khan, 2015; Marino et al., 2017).

A few studies have made attempts to study the trajectories and patterns of social media posts, and they confirm that affluence and success are tied to much social media content (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; McGillivray, 2021; Twenge et al, 2017). They manifest in attractive body images, fashion, gadgets, cars, living places, foods, and lifestyle generally. Others can be school or work-related achievements, romance, travel, tourism, etc. (Boateng & Amankwaa, 2016; Ehmke, n.d.; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). These contents could convey both wholesome and unwholesome intentions.

Studies have shown how social media content that conveys achievements and wealth could cause depression, low self-esteem, and even suicide among young people (Menon et al, 2020; Swist et al, 2015; Twenge et al, 2017). In the report by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2015), there was an over 30% increase of young people seeking counselling services on account of social media consumption. This evidence highlights the importance of preparing for and dealing with the psychosocial consequences of social media usage. Such experience is becoming a matter of research, policy, and service delivery in most developed countries, with special attention on young people (Swist et al, 2015; Ehmke, n.d.; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017 Vogel et al, 2014).

In dealing with the psychosocial challenges created by social media, some studies have highlighted roles for the social work profession (Agwu et al, 2021; Boddy &

Dominelli, 2015; Chan & Ngai, 2019; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017; Mitchell, 2020). Common among these roles include offline sensitization on wholesome usage of social media and the use of targeted online newsfeeds to speak to the concerns of young social media users as well as functional service lines and spaces to pay attention to the psychosocial needs of young people (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2015; Kountur, 2016). Unfortunately, the unavailability of these psychosocial support services in Nigerian tertiary schools is noted in some studies (Agbaje et al, 2021; Idoko et al, 2021). This is further compounded by the bills of both the professions of social work and psychology yet to be signed into law as of the time of writing (Amadasun, 2020; Chukwu et al, 2022; Tyessi, 2019; New Agency of Nigeria, 2021). However, there is evidence that social workers are employed in public institutions, even though there are controversies surrounding the qualifications of most employed social workers in Nigeria's public settings (Agwu & Okoye, 2021; Okoye, 2014).

There is paucity of research on effects of the trajectories of social media posts on young Nigerians, as well as the importance of psychosocial services. This gap could account for the absence of policies and service delivery packages in this direction. Moreover, the increased rate of suicide cases among Nigerian students in tertiary schools (Olufemi, 2019) and internet fraud (Orjiakor et al, 2022), are suggestive of the need for more research on the psychosocial frames of students and psychosocial support services that are available to them. We set out to fill this gap by considering external influences from social media consumption in terms of perceived achievements, and the effects on young people. Where such influence is unwholesome, we answer questions on the availability of support. We aim to contribute to the protection of young people amidst the daily pressures they face on social media, and to enhance user experiences across social media platforms. Our findings will encourage systems in Nigeria to consider the psychosocial frames of young persons as too important to be neglected, and if protected, it will contribute to scaling up their academic performances and overall wellbeing.

Conceptual framework

We rely on identity theory for a framework. The theory is credited to the work of Place, Feigl, and Smart, and fundamentally assumes that mental perceptions significantly aggregated from social and physical experiences are the core determinants of identity (Place, 1956). It is believed that comparisons of achievement metrics are made among people for the purpose of validation, such as the validation of self-identity. With the advent of social media, it is fair to say comparisons among many people have increased, and the search for self-validation might have been intensified. This is in line with studies that assert that humans occupy social positions, and their understandings, feelings, and expectations of their social positions are sourced from

something external, which may now be on social media (Cast & Burke, 2002; Myin & Zahnoun, 2018). Such external sources and associated interactions could (not) be within their control. While it is expected that humans develop abilities to determine and control what they experience by engaging external influences, identity theory suggests that this is not always the case, especially with young people who are yet to gain sufficient understanding of the dynamics of the world and could lack a sense of self-control. This further necessitates the importance of professionals within the psychosocial space helping people contain and gain control over external influences capable of influencing their identities and self-validation, especially those with the potential to initiate unwholesome implications.

Methodology

Study area

Our study was conducted in two Nigerian universities with young undergraduate students. The two universities are in southern Nigeria, which has about 62% of the social media users in Nigeria (NOI Polls, 2019). NOI Polls also reported that the top ranked group on social media are those within ages 18-35 years. Hence, we focused on persons within this age category, and slightly below 18, since there could be persons below 18 who are undergraduate students and active on social media. By being active, we meant those with active social media accounts, and are bound to visit their accounts daily. The selected universities are owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria and their locations are quite cosmopolitan.

Sampling procedure and data collection

We present our data collection and analysis procedures using the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007). We report the procedures under the two subthemes below:

Study design

Identity theory guided our study, and we relied on phenomenology to find meanings in the narratives of the respondents, during and after the interviews. Relying on a combination of convenient and purposive sampling, data were collected from 30 persons, three each in five faculties across the two universities. We selected the universities on account of convenience, given logistics and security concerns. The faculties were selected by simple random sampling through balloting. Interviewed persons from selected faculties were approached based on convenience. However,

response to our first question on ‘activeness’ on social media was going to determine if the interview should continue or not, and this was how we introduced purposive sampling. We only wanted respondents who were active on social media.

Data were collected between August and September 2021 in both institutions. They were audio recorded, and notes were taken. Our questions were open ended to allow the respondents to narrate their experiences. We issued informed consent forms prior to the commencement of any interview. Details of recording, confidentiality and anonymity were captured in the forms. So, the respondents read through before giving consent. We first ensured that the respondents were available to be interviewed for an average of 45 minutes. At the end of each interview, respondents had the opportunity to go through the recorded conversation for the sake of clarity and to avoid misinterpretation.

At some point during the interviews, we discovered slightly repeated experiences in the narratives, suggestive of data saturation. Details of the sociodemographic information of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Analysis and findings

The audio recorded interactions were transcribed into English. Transcripts were read and coded into NVivo. Deductive coding was preferred by us since we generated codes based on the objectives of the study. However, the re-constructions and clarity of earlier drafted codes were influenced by the data, hence the inclusion of inductive coding.

Four final codes arrived at were: (a) Descriptions of perceived achievements as seen on social media by young people (b) Wholesome reactions of young people to the perceived achievements (c) Unwholesome reactions of young people to the perceived achievements (d) Enquires about the availability of professional psychosocial services where needed. After the thematic analysis we handed the data spreadsheet to peers in the social sciences for review in line with peer debriefing (Padgett, 2008). Quotes are reported verbatim. However, we weaved some inferences into the overall presentation of the quotes after critical reflection over the shared experiences.

Sociodemographic information

Data showed that more women than men participated. More respondents indicated to be above 20 years, but none was over 35 years. Facebook was the most dominant social media platform among the respondents. See Table 1 for full description of sociodemographic information.

Table 1
Sociodemographic information of respondents

Sociodemographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage [%]
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	14	46.7
Female	16	53.3
Total	30	100.0
<i>Age</i>		
≤20	8	26.7
>20	22	73.3
Total	30	100.0
<i>Schools</i>		
University 1	15	50.0
University 2	15	50.0
Total	30	100.0
<i>Faculties</i>		
Pure and Natural Sciences	10	33.3
Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences	20	66.7
Total	30	100.0
<i>Most preferred social media</i>		
Facebook	12	40.0
WhatsApp	7	23.3
Instagram	5	16.7
Twitter	2	6.7
Others	4	13.3
Total	30	100.0

Results

Understanding the descriptions of perceived achievements as seen on social media by young people

A first important step for us was to tap into the minds of the respondents to understand what they consider as affluence and success or achievements on social media. From their narratives, lifestyles of celebrities appeared to be a dominant description of achievements, and for some, doing enough to have many online followers was listed.

People like Mr X (a popular Nigerian actor), Mr Y (a popular Nigerian comedian), and most celebrities are doing well [...] I may not be able to tell how much money they have but from

what I see they do on social media, I will say they are successful [...] I pay attention to them when they drop words of advice [...] [Male, Faculty of Clinical Sciences]

Some participants emphasized that those who have great stories to tell about how they rose from nothingness to making good achievements should be considered successful.

Success to me means what you have been able to create. The history you have been able to create out of nothing and the impact of that history on people [...] I give respect to such people who rose from nothing to something [...] They must have passed through so many obstacles and storms to be there, and I owe them that respect. [Female, Faculty of Natural Sciences]

The respondents also added that being generous online and having material objects to show are suggestive of achievements.

In the WhatsApp group of my classmates from secondary school, my friends show their cars, visas, and some are living in good houses. They do giveaways (random gifting of money) on the group from time to time. Although I admire them, but I feel left behind. [Male, Faculty of Pharmacy]

From the foregoing, most of the respondents considered achievements on social media in terms of material possessions, a large number of online followers, the ability to gift money randomly, and having some 'grass-to-grace' histories. And these seem to be the influences they react to.

Wholesome reactions of young people to perceived achievements on social media

Before identifying the unwholesome reactions, we tried to consider some positive elements the young person's take from the perceived achievements on social media as they have described. For some of them, they were encouraged to go further to do more findings concerning the stories and rise of these persons, and others said they often felt encouraged by their words.

I am active on Twitter and I follow people like Elon Musk, Jack, and all. When they tweet, they make you think outside the box [...] When looking at those up there, we try to know their stories. This makes me think that some things are actually achievable [...] [Male, Faculty of Arts]

Some of the respondents mentioned that they try to be circumspect with what they see as affluence and success on social media by believing that some could be just for show-off.

I try to be careful because I have heard that some of these people could post what they really do not have or who they are not online. Some go as far as borrowing the items they show-off

with. Some will even visit airports, take a picture, and claim to have travelled by air. That is why I do not like them and not moved at all by whatever I see. They are all fake. [Male, Faculty of Arts]

Although, some expressed being intimidated by such perceived affluence and success, they however said they get motivated to work hard and pray for their time to come when they could be described as affluent or successful.

It is true that I get intimated and maybe a little bit envious of these people, especially those that are my age. Of course, you do not need to blame me because I am human. On Instagram, you see someone who is my age even saying that she got herself a mansion or built a house for her parents. You keep wondering how they got the money. I really want to live that kind of life; I really want to achieve these things. I think I just have to keep working hard and praying. If they can achieve those things, I can too. It may take some time, but I will [...] [Female, Faculty of Natural Sciences]

Unwholesome reactions of young people to perceived achievements on social media

On the unwholesome side, we got a lot more responses from the respondents. There were reported cases of depression that led to substance abuse, disbelief in self, considerations for joining illegitimate businesses, and low self-esteem issues.

I cannot be happy about it because most days I feel intimidated financially by some of my mates who are already ahead of me. My friend bought a Lexus 330 (an exotic car in Nigeria) last month. Although I felt happy for him, but I still feel I am getting it wrong somewhere [...] *I resort to drinking alcohol and smoking to forget that I am not doing fine like my friends. I have considered joining the internet fraudsters even [...]* *I sincerely do feel bad.* [Male, Engineering Faculty]

For some of them with peers as graduates, they considered still being in school as a setback or not favoured (attribution to divinity or knowing a powerful person that can influence admission into higher institution).

I am getting used to it. We see posts about different invitations, new cars, new jobs, etc., in my secondary school set's WhatsApp group chat, and I am still here in school struggling. Most times, you will be wondering if you are still the only one in school [...] [Female, Faculty of Management Science]

For the women, a 'curvy' bodily physique which is considered sexually appealing was considered worth having to attract good attention on social media. This

is because, they have seen that those with such physiques appear to be living comfortably and doing fine via their social media handles. It was reported that some ladies have joined the pursuit of getting a sexually appealing body physique, sometimes at their peril.

Enquiries about the need and availability of professional psychosocial services

Among the respondents, there is the belief that social media has come to stay, and its associated consequences should rather be managed. We found an increasing consciousness among the respondents on the need to manage unwholesome social media experiences.

We are in a society where most people display to be comfortable online, whereas they are still striving to make a living. Most people are interested in physical appearances and financial displays on these platforms. All that is needed is to guide and educate them to change their perceptions about what they see on social media. [Male, Faculty of Physical and Applied Sciences]

Whatever we do has to do with our mind. The perception of 'getting everything now' has to be worked on in the lives of the young people. Many of them do not understand the stories behind the successes they see on social media. We do need help. Male, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine]

A gap in intervention the respondents mentioned is the absence of quality attention paid to mental health in Nigeria. Some of them expressed needing a counsellor but found none. Consequently, they rely more on relatives, friends, or religious clerics for counselling services.

We do not regard mental health as a problem in this country. I normally meet my Pastor for counselling. At times, I confide in friends or talk to my siblings whenever I can't bear it anymore. We should have a place for counselling in our schools where students can comfortably meet professionals to discuss whatever that is disturbing them. [Female, Faculty of Social Sciences]

Another said:

[...] This is really the problem – being bothered but no one to talk to. We know how our parents behave here in Nigeria. They usually do not understand the pressure we are going through. I smoke because it helps me deal with the pressure. Maybe, I will not be smoking today if there is a xercising unit in this school where I can visit and share my problems without feeling judged. Trust me, many young persons need to be heard, many of them. We are going through a lot and social media is worsening these things [...] [Male, Engineering Faculty]

Discussion

Our study has provided evidence that a considerable number of young people are most likely to look up events in the lives of people on social media to define achievements. While this could be wholesome and impact their lives positively, there are worrying concerns about the generated unwholesome consequences. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the dominant social media platforms in Nigeria (NOI Polls, 2019), and our study concurs. Our research has shown that influences from these various platforms are affecting dispositions of young people in society, as they aspire towards upward social mobility. There is evidence that this same occurrence is happening across the globe (Allen & Mendick, 2012; McGillivray, 2021). Social workers have been encouraged to build skills in e-professionalism, by accepting and recognizing the intense influence of social media and should brace up to deal with the associated concerns (Boddy & Dominelli, 2015; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017).

A key finding in this study is the dominance of the entertainment sector on the achievement radar of young people who use social media. This is understandable because entertainers need enough publicity to stay in the business of entertaining, and social media offers them the leeway to do so. Sometimes, publicity for them could go as far as displaying their private lives and personal properties like cars, houses, ornaments, and even physical cash, which might be a way to build their attractiveness or stay relevant. As celebrities they are, they command large amounts of followers who are exposed to their activities on social media and are likely to see them as models. Although our study did not specifically examine celebrities' influence on young people, but evidence suggests that caution should be applied when young people look up to the lifestyles of celebrities on social media, especially those in the entertainment sector. This is because of how the lifestyles of celebrities are prone to misinterpretations by those who may not be physically close to them. Studies in Asia and Europe present similar findings (Allen & Mendick, 2012; Menon et al, 2020).

There were few mentions of some persons away from the entertainment sector that appealed to the attention of the young people we interviewed. They were either religious clerics or those within modern-technological industry (popularly referred to as 'tech'). We could intuitively say that the status-symbol of the non-entertainment group was the attraction. For many, achievement was more in the direction of monetarily quantifiable items and experiences. Put differently, the economy of people on social media, especially in terms of lifestyles, owned properties and large social media following were metrics to measure achievement for most of the respondents. While these metrics are good aspirations, appropriateness and legitimacy must be put into consideration and communicated (Vogel et al, 2014).

Consequently, some of the respondents felt they wanted to be like those they perceived as successful on social media, and some suggested that they at some point considered going into fraud (see Orjiakor et al, 2022). Instructively, our study has

confirmed further the pressure on most young people and the influence exerted by social media, which if not managed can lead to devastating consequences. It supports identity theory, in the regard of external influences on the personalities of people, and the importance of having trained external moderators (such as social workers or psychologists) to manage such external influences.

The penchant to attain material achievements cannot be disconnected from the economic realities of the world, particularly in low resource regions. Core economic indicators in Nigeria have not been impressive for a while, culminating in increased statistics of persons living in extreme poverty, depletion of the middle class, reduced purchasing power, and increase in unemployment and underemployment (The World Bank, 2022). Certainly, households and individuals are affected. The implication is that people need more material achievements to cope, thrive, and exit harsh and vulnerable economic conditions. Unfortunately, despite the usefulness of social media, it has in part contributed to the experiences of these harsh economic realities by breeding the amplification of ‘relative economic assessment’ akin to ‘relative poverty’ – a situation where people consider themselves poor or not doing economically fine based on the standards of others that appear to be doing better than themselves (Myin & Zahnoun, 2018).

We found manifestations of unwholesome self-perceptions and self-valuation leading to substance abuse, self-pity, and the females were said to make attempts to alter their bodily physique to become sexually appealing for the benefit of making money or becoming famous. These manifestations were inspired by the perceived achievements they found on social media. For most, there was less concern about the stories behind what they see on social media. They only wanted to grow into such a lifestyle. There are suggestions that most of the respondents were uncomfortable with their current stages in life or conditions and appeared desperate for upward social mobility which caused them mental health issues, especially depression and anxiety. Similar findings exist in literature (Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Ngonso, 2019; Pantic et al, 2012).

But then, the culture among Nigerians that profoundly celebrates material achievements, barely asking questions around the source should form intense public space conversations. Orjiakor et al (2022) exposed how Nigerian parents and communities enabled internet fraudsters. Parents and community leaders should ordinarily provide support to young people who inadvertently are exposed to the material experiences of the world. However, it could be possible that some might not be up to such responsibility or might lack the requisite skills to effectively engage their teenagers and youths. This buttresses the importance of professional external control (social service professionals) in guiding young people cope with the pressure from social media. These professionals could as well provide support to parents and other caregivers in the communities, which include reminding them of their responsibilities and transferring the requisite skills they need to effectively engage their younger ones.

Young people are indeed faced by increasing daily pressures to meet achievement metrics that are replete on social media. Indeed, while upward social mobility is encouraged, the motivations and processes must be a matter of concern as some of the respondents acknowledged. Unfortunately, respondents reported the dearth of professional facilities around them, as they combat with increasing daily pressures caused by their interactions on social media. It was common to hear from them that they have at several points needed professional help but could find none, even in their universities. At best, religious clerics, friends and family members were the most easily reachable support systems they could find. But according to some of the respondents, these support systems could be judgemental of them, and at times, unavailable. Studies in higher institutions in Nigeria have shown that psychosocial services are either absent or not known to those who need such services (Agbaje et al, 2021; Idoko et al, 2021). A study linked this gap to increased suicide cases among students in Nigerian higher institutions (Olufemi, 2019).

Therefore, with increased pressures on young people to ascend the social strata, and their intense social media engagement, there are profound threats to their identities, which demands quality and available psychosocial services offered by qualified social workers, psychologists, counsellors, among others. An added strategy is to encourage these professionals within tertiary schools to engage the students both online and offline. They can create social media handles that will galvanize interactions around the cultivation of good values and to help popularize the services they offer. Taking treatment and advocacy to online fronts is a vital opportunity for social workers to engage with young people and their huge social media presence (Boddy & Dominelli, 2015). Ultimately, social service professionals within tertiary schools must amplify their presence by advancing the publicity of their services, and always ready to match such publicity with optimal service delivery. Several studies have recommended the need for social workers to take their destinies into their hands by emphasizing in public domain, what they do, and why they are important (Agwu & Okoye, 2021; Amadasun, 2020). This could be referred to as 'social work gatekeeping' in institutions, which is considered vital to the clamour for the professionalization of social work in contexts where the social work profession is enmeshed in identity crisis (Agwu et al, 2022; Chukwu et al, 2022).

In conclusion, our findings have contributed to the evidence that young people in Nigeria are facing the pressure to be successful, which is a good ambition. But there is the need to be circumspect, inspired by professional psychosocial support services that should be available and accessible in tertiary schools, and must be active, viable, and affordable. Social media is a much-needed change for the world, yet its attendant consequences, especially on young people, must be managed. Overall, mental health in Nigeria should be considered a priority, and finely knitted into the fabrics of places of learning. Mental health facilities should be available, accessible, and affordable across secondary and tertiary schools and to all young people, as such provision will be meaningful in managing the pressures they face, and even

help them focus on their studies. Finally, we recommend that our study should be expanded to more populations beyond tertiary schools, and in other geopolitical zones. There might be the need to investigate the influences exercised by each of the social media platforms, including LinkedIn (not profound in this study), to ascertain if the experiences will vary across the different platforms. Also, with an expected projection of over 100 million social media users in Nigeria by 2026, of which young people make up the largest fraction (Statista, 2021), it is important to extend the conversation to capture young people who are yet to enter tertiary institutions, and not leaving out those in secondary/high schools. Though, we focused on tertiary schools, we believe that the presented evidence and recommendations can apply in similar settings where young people are exposed to social media.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Nigeria. Verbal consent was sought as approved by the Research Ethics Committee. Respondents were promised anonymity.

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