

**Social Media Use as a Predictor of Suicide Ideation among University  
Undergraduate in Anambra State.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The increasing case of Suicide among young people is on the increase, with the World Health Organisation reporting that over 800,000 cases of suicide occur annually. Suicide is often preceded by suicidal ideation, thoughts on how to end one's life. While many studies have focused on the associations that exist among mood disorders, substance use and suicidal ideation, this study will focus on the prevalence of social media use and its possible relationship with suicide ideation. The Correlation Research Design was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised all the 335 final year Political Science students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, both in Anambra State. Data were collected using a researcher-made Extent of Social Media use Questionnaire (ESMQ), and an adapted version of Williams (1987) Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire, SIQ. Cronbach Alpha technique was applied to ascertain the internal consistency of the instruments which yielded values of 0.81, 0.76, and 0.89 for the three clusters of the ESMQ, and 0.84 for the SIQ. Data collected were analysed using SPSS Version 26. The research questions were answered with the Pearson Product Moment Correlation, while the hypotheses were tested using Simple Linear Regression. Findings indicated that frequency of social media use, validation seeking behaviour and social comparison had weak correlation with suicide ideation among undergraduate students in Anambra State. Also, it was found that frequency

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of social media use as need for validation did not significantly predict suicide ideation among university undergraduates. However, it was found that social comparison did predict suicide ideation. It was recommended that digital wellness programs should be implemented within educational institutions to raise awareness about healthy social media use, among others.

**Keywords:** Social Media Use, Validation Seeking, Social Comparison, Suicide Ideation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the issue of mental health among undergraduate students has garnered increased attention due to the recognized potential sources of stress and anxiety within academic environments (Ezeonwumelu *et al.*, 2023, Ezeonwumelu *et al.*, 2022, Prowse *et al.*, 2021). One of the most alarming mental health concerns is the prevalence of suicidal ideation, a deeply troubling manifestation of distress that demands urgent investigation and intervention. Suicidal ideation involves contemplation or persistent thoughts about intentionally ending one's own life, ranging from fleeting considerations to more elaborated and detailed plans (Cwik *et al.*, 2020). It represents a complex challenge with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities.

Amidst the challenges of mental health, a contemporary concern has emerged the pervasive influence of social media use. Social media platforms, designed to connect individuals and facilitate information sharing, have become omnipresent in the lives of young adults. However, as these platforms offer a virtual space for social interaction, they also bring forth potential risks, including the exacerbation of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

The seamless integration of social media into the daily lives of undergraduate students prompts a critical examination of the potential link between social media usage patterns and mental health outcomes. Social media use, characterized by the amount of time individuals dedicate to virtual platforms, often at the expense of their

real-life obligations and activities (Ezeonwumelu *et al.*, 2021, Ezeonwumelu & Okoro, 2019), has emerged as a contemporary challenge with implications for the well-being of individuals within academic settings. The constant connectivity facilitated by social media may offer both benefits and drawbacks, and understanding its correlation with mental health concerns, particularly suicidal ideation, is paramount. Social media use encompasses various behaviors, including excessive time spent online, need for validation, and social comparison.

Excessive time spent online, a hallmark of social media use, refers to the disproportionate amount of time individuals dedicate to virtual platforms, often at the expense of their real-life obligations and activities (Ezeonwumelu *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon is characterized by an obsessive and compulsive engagement with online spaces, where users may find themselves immersed in a digital environment for extended periods. This behavior transcends mere leisure or information-seeking and becomes a pervasive presence in daily life, impacting academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being.

Validation seeking within the context of social media use encapsulates a fundamental human desire for acceptance and affirmation from others in the virtual realm (Ch'ng & Soo Hoo, 2022). In the digital age, social media platforms have become arenas where individuals actively seek validation through various mechanisms, such as likes, comments, and shares. The relentless pursuit of positive online feedback serves as a gauge for one's self-worth, often influencing self-esteem and emotional well-being. This phenomenon creates a feedback loop wherein individuals may feel compelled to continually curate their online presence to garner approval, inadvertently contributing to a sense of dependence on external validation. Social comparison involves individuals assessing themselves in relation to others, often using external benchmarks to evaluate their own abilities, achievements, or

social standing (Viglia & Abrate, 2014). On social media platforms, users are exposed to curated aspects of others' lives, creating a fertile ground for comparative thinking.

Suicidal ideation is a deeply troubling manifestation of distress that demands urgent investigation and intervention. While previous studies have associated suicidal ideation with factors such as family history, substance abuse, and previous suicide attempts, the specific impact of social media use behaviors remains underexplored. This research will focus on three distinct aspects of social media use: excessive time spent online, need for validation, and social comparison to identify their varying influences on suicidal ideation among undergraduate students. Life has its ups and downs, causing distress on the mental health of humans. In the pursuit of an end to such distress, some individuals might want to explore routes such as suicidal ideation. Understanding the intricate relationship between suicidal ideation and its determinants is essential. Studies have associated suicidal ideation with previous suicide attempts, family history of suicide, and substance abuse. However, this research aims to identify the extent of relationship of social media use, such as excessive time spent online, need for validation, and social comparison, and their varying impacts on suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study is to investigate the correlation between social media use and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Identify the relationship between excessive social media use and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

2. Assess the relationship between need for validation and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria
3. Identify the relationship between social comparison and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. To what extent does excessive social media use relate with suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?
2. To what extent does the need for validation relate with suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?
3. How does social comparison relate with suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?

### **Hypotheses**

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between excessive social media use and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students' public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between of the need for validation and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students' public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between social comparison and suicidal ideation among undergraduate studentspublic universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

## **METHODS**

This study adopted the correlation research design. According to Nworgu (2015), this research design is one that allows for the study relationships between variables. This design was considered appropriate for the present study because it aimed at investigating the correlation between social media use and suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria, using a representative sample.

The population of the study consisted of 335 final year Political Science students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu University, Igbariam. The sample was drawn from final year undergraduate students in the Public Universities in Anambra State. The entire students were sampled for the study because of the relatively small population. Thus, the entire 335 Political Science students from Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Igbariam were sampled for the study.

Two instruments were used to collect data for this research project; a researcher developed questionnaire titled “Extent of Social Media use Questionnaire (ESMQ)” was used to measure the respondents' Social media use, while a standardised instrument by Williams (1987), titled "Suicide Ideation Questionnaire, SIQ, was adapted to test the intention of student in relation to suicide. The ESMQ has a total of 15 items based on the four- point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The adapted SIQ, on the other hand has a total of 24 items and scored on a four- point scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

To ascertain the validity of the instrument, two copies of the questionnaire including the title, purpose of the study and research questions were given to two

experts in the department of Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, a trail test was carried out. Copies of the instrument were administered to 50 students in Tansian University Umuoya which is outside the study area. Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.81, 0.76 and 0.89 were obtained for clusters 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Also, the overall reliability estimate obtained for the ESMQ was 0.84. The instrument was therefore considered reliable enough to be used for the study. The research questions were answered using Pearson Product Moment Correlation, PPMC, while hypotheses were tested using Simple Regression analysis at .05 level of significance.

## **Results**

**Research Question One:** How does excessive time spent online influence suicidal ideation among undergraduate students' public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?

**Table 1: Correlational Analysis between the Excessive Time Spent Online and Suicidal Ideation in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.**

	<b>N</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Sig. Value</b>
Excessive Time Spent Online – Suicide Ideation	100	.191	.037	.027	.056

Table 1 revealed that the correlation between excessive time spent online and suicidal ideation is 0.191 which implies a weak and positive correlation between the independent and dependent variables. Consequently, it denotes that excessive time spent online had a weak relationship with suicidal ideation among undergraduates in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Research Question Two:** To what extent does validation seeking influence suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?

**Table 2: Relationship between the Validation Seeking and Suicidal Ideation**

	N	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Sig. Value
Validation Seeking – Suicide Ideation	100	.119	.014	.004	.239

Data in Table 2 revealed the relationship between the validation seeking and suicidal ideation. The results recorded a correlational coefficient of 0.119 which implies a weak and positive relationship between the two variables. Therefore, validation seeking has a low correlation with suicide ideation among the undergraduates' students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Research Question Three:** How does social comparison influence suicidal ideation among undergraduate students' public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria?

**Table 3: Correlational Analysis between the Social Comparison and Suicidal Ideation**

	N	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Sig. Value
Social Comparison – Suicide Ideation	100	.247*	.061	.052	.013

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 revealed that the correlation between social comparison and suicide ideation is 0.247 which implies a weak and positive correlation between social comparison and suicide ideation. Consequently, it shows that social comparison had a weak correlation with suicide ideation among the undergraduates students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis One:** Excessive time spent online has no significant effect on suicide ideation.



**Table 4: Prediction Analysis on the Influence of Excessive Time Spent Online on Suicide Ideation**

		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
		Unstandardized		Standardized			
		Coefficients		Coefficients			
		Std.					
Model		B	Error	Beta	R	Sig.	F
1	(Constant)	.977	.258				
	Excessive Time_Spent Online	.203	.105	.191	.191 <sup>a</sup>	.056	3.730
							.056 <sup>b</sup>

a. Dependent Variable: Suicide Ideation  
b. Predictors: (Constant), Excessive Time Spent Online

The predictive influence of excessive time spent online on the suicide ideation among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka was shown in Table 4. The Beta value was ascertained to be  $B = 0.191$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the p-value (0.056) is greater than 0.05, so the null hypothesis was accepted. Thus, the excessive time spent online had low predictive power on suicidal ideation among the undergraduates' students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis Two:** Validation seeking had no significant influence on suicide ideation

**Table 5: Regression Analysis of the influence of Validation Seeking on Suicide Ideation**

		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
		Unstandardized		Standardized			
		Coefficients		Coefficients			
		Std.					
Model		B	Error	Beta	R	Sig.	F
1	(Constant)	1.198	.232				
	Validation_Seeking	.127	.107	.119	.119 <sup>a</sup>	.239	1.406
							.239 <sup>b</sup>

a. Dependent Variable: Suicide Ideation  
b. Predictors: (Constant), Validation Seeking

Table 5 showed the regression analysis on the influence of validation seeking on suicide ideation. The regression coefficient of 0.119 ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the p-value (0.239) which is greater than 0.05, revealed that the null hypothesis was not rejected. Therefore, the predictive power of validation seeking on suicide ideation among is not significant among the undergraduates' students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis Three:** Social Comparison had no significant influence on suicide ideationInfluence

**Table 6: Prediction Analysis on the of Excessive Time Spent Online on Suicide Ideation**

		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
		Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	R	Sig.	F
Model	B						
1 (Constant)	.961	.206					
Social Comparison	.237	.094		.247	.247 <sup>a</sup>	.013	6.387
							.013 <sup>b</sup>

a. Dependent Variable: Suicide Ideation  
b. Predictors: (Constant), Social Comparison

The predictive influence of social comparison on suicide ideation among undergraduates in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka was shown in Table 6. The Beta value was ascertained to be  $B = 0.247$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) and the p-value (0.013) is lower than 0.05, so the null hypothesis was rejected. Thus, social comparison has a predictive power on suicidal ideation among undergraduates' students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria.

## Discussion of Findings

Based on findings of Table 1, it was discovered that excessive time spent online had a weak and positive relationship with suicide ideation. Also, Table 4 also

showed that excessive time spent online had no predictive power on the suicide ideation of undergraduates in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria. This implies that although excessive time spent online may be related to suicide ideation as one of its causes, but it is not a predictive factor among the students in the study area. This is in line with the findings of Shafi, *et al.*, (2019) that this phenomenon extends beyond leisure or information-seeking, transforming into a pervasive presence in daily life. Individuals find themselves immersed in a digital environment for extended periods, leading to distorted perceptions of time and potential neglect of responsibilities. The findings although, disagreed with Pastorino, *et al.* (2020) that excessive time spent online can serve as a form of escapism from real-world challenges and stressors. Individuals may retreat into the digital realm to avoid confronting difficulties, creating a temporary reprieve but potentially exacerbating underlying emotional distress. Thus, social support could be said to have an indirect influence on academic success.

Findings in Table 2 revealed that there is a weak and positive relationship between validation seeking and suicidal ideation. Also, results in Table 5 also showed that predictive power of validation seeking on suicide ideation among is not significant among the undergraduate students' public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria. The findings did not augur with that of Perloff (2014) who claimed that validation-seeking behavior on social media may expose individuals to cyberbullying and victimization, further impacting their mental health. The vulnerability created by the reliance on online affirmation makes individuals susceptible to negative online interactions, potentially leading to increased stress and emotional distress. The disparities in the findings could be the need for validation in the digital age encapsulates a fundamental human desire for acceptance and affirmation from others in the virtual realm (Elfeshawy *et al.*, 2023). Social media

platforms, designed as arenas for connection, have evolved into spaces where individuals actively seek validation through various mechanisms, such as likes, comments, and shares. Thus, it could be summarized that validation seeking does not have any strong influence on the suicide ideation of undergraduates.

Findings in Table 3 revealed that there is a weak and positive relationship between social comparison and suicidal ideation. Also, results in Table 6 also showed that predictive power of social comparison on suicide ideation is significant among the undergraduate students in public universities in Anambra State, Nigeria. This is in line with the findings of Primack, *et al.*, (2017), that social media platforms often present idealized and curated versions of individuals' lives, contributing to a heightened sense of social comparison. When users consistently compare their own circumstances to the seemingly perfect lives portrayed online, feelings of inadequacy and a distorted self-perception can emerge, potentially increasing vulnerability to suicidal ideation. Also, the findings of the study are also in line with the expositions of Kingsbury, *et al.*, (2021) that social comparison, if characterized by envy, can be a significant predictor of suicidal ideation.

## **Conclusion**

The study concluded that rejection sensitivity, validation seeking behaviour and social comparison associated with excessive use of social media has a significant association with suicide ideation among university students in Anambra State.

## **Implication of the Findings**

The implication of these findings underscores the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms tailored to the specific social media behaviors that impact mental health. Simply addressing overall social media use may overlook the unique influences of different behaviors. Recognizing the distinct roles of

excessive time spent online, validation seeking, and social comparison allows for more precise and effective strategies to promote mental well-being among undergraduate students.

### **Recommendations**

1. Digital wellness programs should be implemented within educational institutions to raise awareness about healthy social media use.
2. Educational campaigns should be launched that focus on digital literacy and the potential impact of social media behaviors on mental health.
3. Mental health support services should be strengthened within educational institutions, offering counseling services that specifically address issues related to social media use.
4. Guidance should be provided to parents and educators on fostering a healthy digital environment. This includes encouraging open communication about social media use, setting age-appropriate limits, and promoting a balanced lifestyle that includes offline activities.
5. Developing of institutional policies informed by research findings to regulate and guide social media use among students.

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