

Social Media Usage and Freedom of Expression Among Undergraduate Students of Nigerian Universities in Oyo State

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Abstract: *The study aimed to examine social media usage and freedom of expression among undergraduate students in Oyo State Universities. The study focused on undergraduate students of public and private Universities in Oyo State. With a large and dynamic population, Cochran (1977) formula for an infinite population was employed to arrive at a sample size of 384 respondents. The data were gathered by using a structured questionnaire of which 374 valid questionnaires were retrieved and analyzed with descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression with the help of SPSS 27.0 software. Results showed that the use of social media had a significant joint effect on freedom of expression ($R = 0.614$, $R^2 = 0.377$, $F = 74.748$, $p < .001$). In particular, social media engagement had a significant positive effect on freedom of expression ($\beta = 0.586$, $p < .001$), and frequency of social media use a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.111$, $p = .008$). But exposure to social media content did not significantly impact freedom of expression ($\beta = -0.001$, $p = .987$). The study found that the key to free expression for undergraduate students was not how often they used social media but rather their engagement with social media. The study recommends that universities foster responsible use of social media, in particular by implementing digital literacy programs, engaging and collaborative learning experiences, and policies that encourage positive and responsible use while protecting responsible freedom of expression online.*

Keywords: social media usage, social media engagement, exposure to social media content, freedom of expression.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have rapidly evolved and changed the ways in which people communicate, access information and engage in social and political conversations worldwide. Social media is one of the most influential innovations of modern communication, offering interactive spaces where people can create, share and exchange information regardless of geographic or institutional boundaries. This is unlike conventional media, which is one-way communication; social media allows people to interact with the content, voice their opinions and seek support for social issues, and be part of public discourse. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube are an essential part of everyday life, especially for younger social media users and university students, who make up one of the largest demographics of social media users globally (Kapoor et al., 2022; Kemp, 2025). Social media have become even more integral to academic life, social networking, civic engagement and political participation amongst undergraduate students with the increasing access to smartphones, affordable internet and digital technology. Social media usage is the use of social media platforms for communication, information sharing, entertainment, educational, collaborative and public engagement activities. It covers both the frequency and intensity of user engagement with social media sites, as well as the purpose and how they engage with the sites. In higher education, social media has become more than just a pastime; it is a valuable resource for learning together, sharing knowledge, discussing ideas, networking with entrepreneurs, and promoting civic engagement. Social media is the main platform for undergraduate students to communicate and share their opinions on academic topics, social issues, and share their academic resources and to be members of virtual communities, and express their opinions on issues concerning the institutions and society. This has made social media a vital part of students' daily lives and how they communicate, interact, and engage in citizen discourse (Kapoor et al., 2022). The freedom of expression is today regarded as one of the most important human rights and rights in democratic societies. It means that people have the right to obtain, access and disseminate information, opinions and ideas without unnecessary restrictions, except as limited by law. In universities, freedom of expression fosters intellectual exploration, critical thinking, academic freedom, innovation and democratic involvement by allowing students to freely debate ideas and question alternative viewpoints. This right has also been enhanced by the use of social media, which now offers students easy access to electronic platforms to share their opinions, join in public debates, promote social issues and be involved in civic life within their campus environments. Social media has become an important tool in promoting young people's democratic engagement as it can give voice to people and create space for public participation (UNESCO, 2024). Various social movements and public campaigns have shown that the popularity of digital platforms for communication have enhanced students' involvement in civic engagement and democratic processes. Yet, while all this, questions have arisen about the positive impact of social media use on student freedom of expression. Questions have been raised regarding the extent to which undergraduate students can freely express their views without fear of intimidation or adverse consequences, due to the prevalence of cyberbullying, misinformation, online harassment, digital surveillance, hate speech, fear of institutional sanctions and self-censorship (Freedom House, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). Such difficulties indicate that social media is a new and unique means of communication, but at the same time, it can provide environments that inhibit the free expression of ideas

and that reduce the ability to participate in the public discussion. Oyo State lies in the educational centre of the country, and boasts of several Federal, State and private Universities with a significant number of digitally connected students at the undergraduate level. Social media has become ubiquitous among these school students, so this offers a suitable backdrop for a discussion of the role of digital communication in higher education freedom of expression. With the growing extent to which undergraduate students rely on social media for academic purposes, political activity, social interaction and the dissemination of information, it has become crucial for university administrators, decision makers, communication scholars and digital rights advocates to determine whether such use facilitates or hinders undergraduates' freedom of expression. While there have been some studies that have explored extensively the use of social media with respect to academic performance, political participation, mental health, information dissemination, digital addiction and social interaction, few empirical studies have tried to focus specifically on the role of social media in the freedom of expression among the undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. There is an empirical vacuum on how the use of social media can positively or negatively affect students' capacity to express themselves freely in HE institutions. This is significant because the right to free expression is a key pillar for academic learning, democracy, and good digital citizenship within the university context. Hence, there is a need to conduct this study because of the need to provide empirical evidence on the link between the use of social media and freedom of expression among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities in Oyo State. Although there has been much concern about the educational and social implications of social media usage, the implications for students' freedom of expression within the Nigerian context of Higher education has received relatively little focus. Results of this research will add to the existing body of work on democratic participation, digital communication and media studies, offering evidence that will help university administrators, policymakers, communication scholars and stakeholders in developing policy and strategies that foster responsible social media consumption, and ensure that students' rights to free expression are respected. Hence, this study will explore the impact of social media use on freedom of expression of Nigerian universities undergraduate students in Oyo state.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Usage

With the growing reliance on the use of digital platforms for communication, information sharing, education, entertainment, business and civic engagement, the use of social media has emerged as one of the most talked about concepts in the field of communication, information systems and media studies. The growth of internet connected devices and digital technologies has contributed to a surge in people's interactions with social networking sites, so that social media is now a part of life. As a result, researchers have examined social media utilization on various angles that reflect the type, amount, and goal of the users' engagement with these digital platforms. According to Kapoor et al (2022), social media usage is the degree of participation in social media platforms to develop, publish, share and engage in the creation, exchange and consumption of user-generated content, while maintaining social relations and belonging to online communities. The authors describe social media beyond communication, as a tool that is used for collaborative learning, sharing of information, exchanging knowledge and engaging in digital communities that enable interpersonal and organizational interactions.

Likewise, Dwivedi et al. (2023) defined social media use as the pattern of behaviour that individuals use when accessing digital social networks to communicate, receive information, share ideas and opinions, form relationships and conduct business, education, and social activities. The authors highlighted that the use of social media is multi-faceted and can be measured based on how often users use it, the amount of time they spend on it, why they use it, and how involved they are in social media interaction online. Kemp (2025) defined social media usage as the frequent interaction that individuals have with Internet-based communications, information-sharing, participation and entertainment platforms that enable them to engage in social and public discussions. As smartphone penetration has improved and Internet access has become more widespread, social media has become a way of life, rather than a recreational technology, and especially among young adults and university students has become an integral communication tool for academic, social, and civic life, said Kemp. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) defined the use of social media as the use of digital communications technologies to exercise individuals' rights to access information, express ideas, join in public discussions and engage in democratic processes. This organization pointed out that social media is a platform where citizens, particularly young people, engage with institutions, express demands for social transformation and are involved in public decision-making processes.

Furthermore, OECD (2024) explained that social media usage encompasses individuals' interaction with online networking services for communication, collaboration, entertainment, knowledge acquisition, and participation in economic and civic activities. The report indicated that there has been a rise in the importance of social media in shaping behavioural patterns, information consumption and participation in the public sphere in the context of education, business, governance and daily communication.

Social media has become essential for students' academic and social lives in the university setting. Students use social networking to communicate with each other, work on academic activities together, access learning resources, join in online discussions, discuss politics and share their opinions on issues that impact their institutions and society. As social media becomes more deeply intertwined with higher education, the opportunities for participatory learning, sharing knowledge and civic engagement have expanded, as have the risks of misinformation and cyberbullying, digital addiction and harassment. Therefore, it has become more crucial than ever to have insight into the amount and type of students' social media consumption to help describe different educational, behavioral, psychological, and communication outcomes.

Therefore, social media usage is defined as the extent to which undergraduate students utilize digital social networking platforms for communication, academic activities, information sharing, civic engagement, and online interaction, as reflected in the frequency, intensity, purpose, and level of participation in social media activities.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is considered one of the core principles of democratic governance and is a widely recognized human right, allowing for the free exchange of ideas, opinions, beliefs and information without unnecessary restrictions. Its key role in the promotion of democracy, accountability, human rights, academic freedom and citizen participation has captured the interest of scholars, policymakers and

international organisations. The right to freedom of expression has become even more important in today's digital age, where social networks have opened up new possibilities for people to have their voices heard, disseminate information, and be involved in civic life, all from any location. UNESCO (2025) defines freedom of expression as the right of everyone to freely seek, receive and communicate information and ideas through any media and across all borders without interference. The organization accentuated that freedom of expression is fundamental in democratic societies since it allows for access to information, transparency, public participation and inclusive dialogue, as it supports other fundamental human rights. UNESCO also observed that the digital communication technologies have opened up new avenues for exercising this right but have also created new challenges around online censorship, misinformation, hate speech and digital surveillance.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee (2023) stated that freedom of expression encompasses the right of everyone to hold opinions without interference and to communicate information and ideas through any medium or means, irrespective of whether they are oral, written, printed, expressed in art or digital form. The Committee says this right is necessary for personal development, democratic governance and accountability in society as it allows citizens to exchange ideas, criticise the public institutions and participate meaningfully in national development. The Council of Europe (2024) defined freedom of expression as the right to share opinions, disseminate information, access a variety of information and engage freely in public discussion without the fear of intimidation or unlawful restrictions. The Council noted that the exercise of freedom of expression has changed in the era of digital communication, as new online spaces have led to an increase in participation in democratic processes, alongside the risks linked to online abuse, disinformation and algorithmic content moderation.

Freedom House (2024) defined freedom of expression as the freedom to express ideas, opinions, and information through traditional and digital media without interference, intimidation, harassment, or censorship by government or others. This has had an impact on citizens' exercise of freedom of expression online, in social media platforms, and in several countries with increasing regulations of online communication and digital surveillance and restrictions on Internet freedom, particularly young people, the organisation said. In higher education, freedom of expression is seen as an essential part of academic freedom and intellectual growth. Universities have a long tradition of being places where students and scholars can share ideas, question received wisdom, debate matters in a constructive way, and build knowledge.

For this study, freedom of expression will be understood as the range in which undergraduate students can and want to express their ideas, opinions, beliefs and information via social media platforms without fear of being censored, intimidated, harassed, discriminated against or sanctioned by the school or its structures.

Theoretical Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

In 1973, Katz, Jay, Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch developed the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and refined it in 1974. The theory arose from previous media theories which depicted audiences as victims

of media messages. Rather, UGT suggests that the users of media are active users who make a conscious choice of choosing particular media to satisfy the information, educational, social, psychological and entertainment needs. The emphasis is placed on how people use the media, and not the other way round, how the media use people, for the theory is concerned with the way people choose to use the media – deliberate in selection – and that the media are communication vehicles which people choose to use to meet personal and social needs (Katz et al., 1973; Katz et al., 1974). In the digital age, it is more and more pertinent in explaining social media usage. Social media differs from traditional media platforms in that they offer a dynamic space where users are not just consumers, but producers of the media as well. People use Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube to share messages, look for information, connect with friends, join public conversations, and share their thoughts. Social media is used because it offers users gratifications, including, information acquisition, social interaction, entertainment, identity formation, and opportunities for self-expression (Sundar and Limperos 2023). Likewise, Kapoor et al., (2022) found that social media provides an opportunity for users to be active in sharing knowledge, engaging in civic, and collaborative communication. The Uses and Gratifications Theory can be used to explain how social media has become a more popular mode of communication for undergraduate students who are using social media to communicate with their peers, catch up on news, and engage in politics. Students actively engage in these platforms to share ideas, engage in discussions about social matters, voice their opinions, and contribute to conversations that shape the public discourse. The theory thus offers a good explanation of how social media use might promote students' freedom of expression by providing easily accessible and interactive platforms for exchanging ideas and democratic discussion. The theory has been criticized, however, for its assumption that media users are always rational and conscious while ignoring the external elements that can affect their freedom to express themselves, including cyberbullying, censorship, institutional rules, digital surveillance and online harassment (Ruggiero, 2023).

Although it has been criticized, this study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which is the best theory used to analyze why undergraduate students use social media platforms to meet their communication and self-expression needs. The theory backs the belief of the researchers that consumption of social media, engagement level, intention to use, and involvement in online conversations are likely to affect students' capacity and willingness to express their opinions freely. Thus, it is the theory that forms the basis to examine the effect of Social media on freedom of expression among undergraduate students of Nigerian Universities in Oyo state.

Empirical Review

Ojo et al. (2025) examined digital democracy in Nigeria: A case study on social media's influence on undergraduate political engagement. The study used descriptive survey research design and 200 third and fourth year undergraduate students of a public University in South-West Nigeria were sampled. The data obtained were analysed through Percentage, Mean and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with reliability coefficient of 0.889 which was obtained using a structured questionnaire. The results showed that the most used social media application by the respondents was WhatsApp (61.5%). The study also confirmed that the level of political participation of the students was in the moderate range (mean = 3.0) and the effect of social media on political participation was also found to be moderate (mean = 3.0). Also, no significant

differences were revealed among the students' political participation inside and outside the campus or in the impact of social media on the political participation of the students. Overall, the study found that social media is a significant channel for increasing political participation and democratic engagement, but that issues of algorithmic curation and echo chambers should be tackled to improve meaningful civic engagement among young adults. The study however, was not conducted on freedom of expression but on political participation. Also, it was limited to one public university and failed to investigate the effects of the use of social media on freedom of expression among the undergraduate students in the Oyo State of Nigeria. Hence the need for the present study on this conceptual and geographical gap.

Okewulonu (2023) studied the regulation of social media in Nigeria and its effect on free speech: perspectives from constitutional law and international norms. This study employed doctrinal legal research design, and the research method used was analysis of the content and provisions of the Constitution, draft bills of law, judicial decisions, international legal instruments and relevant literature from the scholars. The study critically explored the theoretical underpinning of the freedom of expression, the constitutional framework of freedom of speech and press and the principles governing the regulation of online communication in Nigeria. The findings showed that the right to freedom of expression is not absolute, and can be limited under certain conditions, but there was not enough clarity for regulation of harmful information online, including hate speech and misinformation, from existing laws in Nigeria. The study also found that it is important to include proportionality analysis and international human rights standards in Nigeria's legal system, as this would enhance the oversight of online speech without infringing on constitutional rights. The study was able to conclude that the protection of freedom of expression is still important in the continued maintenance of democratic governance, especially in Nigeria's diverse socio-political environment. The study however, was doctrinal legal which did not look at the behavioural experiences of social media users, but rather at legislative and constitutional aspects. Furthermore, it was not able to explore the effect of social media usage on freedom of expression of undergraduate students in Nigerian universities. The methodological and contextual gap makes the present study, which uses a quantitative research method, appropriate to investigate the effects of social media usage on freedom of expression of university undergraduate students of Nigerian universities in Oyo State.

Nannim et al. (2023) investigate Undergraduate students' use of social media in school: A need for regulatory policies in Nigerian universities. The study identified the problems facing the use of social media by students, determined the level of social media abuse among students and determined the prevalence of social media abuse policies in the Nigerian universities. The research used a mixed method which included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The respondents of the study consisted of undergraduate students in the Nigerian Universities and seven senior university administrators who form policy and implement the policies. The data were gathered by using open-ended questionnaires (both online and offline) from which 498 valid responses were obtained and semi-structured interviews with the university administrators. Three experts validated the research instruments and Cronbach's alpha for the quantitative instrument was obtained 0.87. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while the qualitative data were transcribed and analysed using text analysis and frequency query cloud with Atlas.ti software. The results indicated that there are various challenges that students face in using social media such as abuse but there was no existing institutional regulation or policy on the use of social media in

Nigerian universities. Accordingly, the study calls for the formulation and adoption of holistic social media regulatory policies in Nigerian universities. The study, however, was largely oriented towards institutional policies and the role of the regulations in managing social media use, and not on the connection between the use of social media and freedom of expression among students as undergraduate learners. Further, the study included all Universities in Nigeria but failed to examine the undergraduate students in Universities in Oyo State specifically.

METHODOLOGY

The study was quantitative in nature and adopted a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the effect of social media use on the freedom of expression of the respondents, who are undergraduate students in selected Nigerian Universities in Oyo State. The cross-sectional design was deemed suitable since it allows for data collection from a large number of respondents at one-time, allowing for a highly efficient way of studying the relationships among the study variables without manipulating the research environment. The target population were the undergraduate students of public and private universities in Oyo State. The large and dynamic undergraduate population made it impractical to develop a stable sampling frame and therefore the population was considered infinite. The method used is consistent with Cochran (1977), who suggested that the infinite population formula should be used if the population is large or unknown. Therefore, the sample size was calculated using the formula suggested by Cochran (1977) resulting in 384 respondents. A multistage sampling technique was used to ensure representation of undergraduate students from the selected universities in this study. The data were obtained using a structured questionnaire that was developed from literature related to the research and measured using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was tested for face and content validity by experts, and it was reliable, as verified by the pilot study with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 or above, which is accepted.

The completed questionnaires were coded and analysed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. The demographic information and descriptive data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to study the effect of social media use on the freedom of expression of the undergraduate students. All the hypotheses were tested at 5% level of significance.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

All 384 selected respondents were given a copy of the questionnaire. Of these 374 questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a 97.4% return rate; 10 questionnaires were incomplete and/or invalid and were not included in the analysis. Thirty-seven of these responses were valid, and were deemed sufficient for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing. This section discusses the descriptive analysis of the data, multiple regression analysis and interpretation of the results in relation to the objectives of the study.

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Variance	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Frequency of Social Media Use	374	4.28	0.71	0.50	-0.81	0.13	0.68	0.25
Social Media Engagement	374	4.05	0.78	0.61	-0.56	0.13	0.22	0.25
Exposure to Social Media Content	374	4.19	0.69	0.48	-0.74	0.13	0.51	0.25
Freedom of Expression	374	3.97	0.83	0.69	-0.39	0.13	-0.18	0.25

Source: Field Survey (2026).

The descriptive statistics indicate that all the study variables recorded relatively high mean scores, ranging from 3.97 to 4.28, suggesting that respondents generally agreed with the statements measuring the constructs. Frequency of Social Media Use recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.71$), indicating that undergraduate students frequently accessed and used social media platforms. This was followed by Exposure to Social Media Content ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.69$) and Social Media Engagement ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.78$), implying that respondents actively engaged with social media content and interacted regularly on these platforms. Freedom of Expression recorded a mean score of 3.97 ($SD = 0.83$), suggesting that students generally perceived social media as a platform that enables them to express their opinions and ideas.

Furthermore, the skewness values ranged from -0.81 to -0.39 , while the kurtosis values ranged from -0.18 to 0.68 , indicating that the data approximated a normal distribution since all values fell within the acceptable threshold of ± 2 . The relatively low standard deviations further suggest limited variability in respondents' opinions, indicating a high level of consistency in their responses. Consequently, the data were considered suitable for subsequent inferential analyses, including multiple regression.

Test of Hypotheses

Hi: Social media usage has a significant influence on freedom of expression among undergraduate students of Nigerian universities in Oyo State.

Table 4.2:

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	R Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.614 ^a	.377	.372	.733

a. Predictors: (Constant), Exposure to Social Media Content, Frequency of Social Media Use, Social Media Engagement

Table 4.2 presents the model summary for the multiple regression analysis examining the influence of frequency of social media use, social media engagement, and exposure to social media content on freedom of expression among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities in Oyo State. The results indicate a multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.614$), suggesting a moderately strong positive relationship between the combined independent variables and freedom of expression. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.377$) shows that 37.7% of the variation in freedom of expression is explained jointly by frequency of social media use, social media engagement, and exposure to social media content, while the remaining 62.3% is attributable to other factors not included in the model. The adjusted R^2 of 0.372 indicates that, after adjusting for the number of predictors, the model still explains 37.2% of the variance in freedom of expression, demonstrating good explanatory power. Furthermore, the standard error of the estimate (0.733) suggests a relatively small average prediction error, indicating that the regression model provides a reasonably good fit to the observed data.

Table 4.3:
ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	120.575	3	40.192	74.748	.000 ^b
	Residual	198.946	370	.538		
	Total	319.521	373			

a. Dependent Variable: Freedom of Expression

b. Predictors: (Constant), Exposure to Social Media Content, Frequency of Social Media Use, Social Media Engagement

Table 4.3 presents the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results for the multiple regression model examining the influence of frequency of social media use, social media engagement, and exposure to social media content on freedom of expression among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities in Oyo State. The results indicate that the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F(3, 370) = 74.748$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that the combined effect of the three social media usage variables significantly predicts freedom of expression. The regression sum of squares ($SS = 120.575$) represents the variation in freedom of expression explained by the predictors, while the residual sum of squares ($SS = 198.946$) represents the unexplained variation. The significance value ($p = .000$) is less than the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the regression model provides a significantly better fit than a model without the predictors. Therefore, the null hypothesis that frequency of social media use, social media engagement, and exposure to social media content have no significant joint influence on freedom of expression is rejected. The findings imply that the social media usage variables collectively make a statistically significant contribution to explaining variations in freedom of expression among undergraduate students.

Table 4.4:
Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.633	.286		5.714	.000
	Frequency of Social Media Use	-.101	.038	-.111	-2.657	.008
	Social Media Engagement	.706	.056	.586	12.678	.000
	Exposure to Social Media Content	-.001	.036	-.001	-.016	.987

a. Dependent Variable: Freedom of Expression

The regression coefficients in Table 4.4 indicate the effect of the individual variables (frequency of social media use, social media engagement, exposure to social media content) on freedom of expression of undergraduate students in Nigerian universities in Oyo State. The constant coefficient ($\beta = 1.633$, $p < .001$) indicates the predicted level of freedom of expression when all the predictor variables are held constant. The findings show that use of social media has a significant negative association with freedom of expression ($B = -0.101$, $\beta = -0.111$, $t = -2.657$, $p = .008$). It suggests that when other factors are kept constant, the more children use social media, the lower their level of free expression. Conversely, social media engagement has a strong positive effect on freedom of expression ($B = 0.706$, $\beta = 0.586$, $t = 12.678$, $p < .001$) which implies that those who are actively involved in social media activities, like posting, commenting, sharing and interacting with the content, are more likely to express their opinions and ideas. With the largest standardized beta coefficient ($\beta = 0.586$), social media engagement is the strongest predictor of freedom of expression in the model.

But the simple exposure to social media content has no statistically significant impact on students' freedom of expression ($B = -0.001$, $\beta = -0.001$, $t = -0.016$, $p = .987$), meaning that the mere exposure to social media content doesn't make a significant difference in the ability or willingness of students to express themselves. The results suggest that active engagement with social media has a significant positive effect on freedom of expression, but frequent use of social media has a small negative effect, and seeing content without active participation does not significantly predict freedom of expression among undergraduate students.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results of this study indicated that the use of social media has a significant combined effect on freedom of expression among undergraduate students of Nigerian universities in Oyo state. Specifically, the regression analysis revealed that the frequency of using social media and social media engagement and exposure to social media content explained 37.7% of the variance in freedom of expression, suggesting that social media has emerged as an important means of students' communication, information sharing

and opinion expression. At an individual level, social media engagement was the only factor to have a significant positive association with freedom of expression while frequency of social media use was a significant negative effect, and exposure to social media content was not significant in predicting freedom of expression. This indicates that simply increasing the time spent on social media or exposure to online content is not enough to make students feel free to express themselves. Instead, freedom of expression is enhanced through interaction, such as posting, commenting, expressing opinions and engaging in discussions on the Internet, among undergraduate students.

The results are in accordance with the study of Ojo et al., 2025 which found that social media is one of the media that can be used to promote democratic engagement and political participation among undergraduate students. Although both studies studied political participation and not freedom of expression, they show that social media offers opportunities for students to actively engage in public discourse and civic engagement. The present study adds to the work of Ojo et al. (2025) by revealing the impact of “active engagement” in social media on the freedom of expression of students, not only the frequency of use. In the same vein, the results support the Okewulonu (2023) findings which noted that freedom of expression is one of the core principles of democratic governance and digital platforms have emerged as crucial avenues for the practice of constitutional rights to free speech. The present study is an empirical study which comes from undergraduate students in the university, whereas Okewulonu's study was based on doctrinal legal analysis that highlights how behavioral patterns of social media engagement affect freedom of expression exercise. The fact that exposure to social media content was not a significant predictor is another indication of the need to have a digital platform for meaningful expression if users are not actively involved in it.

Also, the results are in line with Nannim et al. (2023) who reported that social media is increasingly being used by Nigerian university students and that the institutions have no policies to govern its use. The present study supports Nannim et al. (2023) by highlighting the importance of the quality of students' interaction with social media, rather than quantity, as this research focused on social media abuse, regulatory frameworks, and students' engagement with social media. The implication of the significant positive effect of social media engagement is that by actively engaging in the social media media, students have the opportunity to be more free in expressing themselves; however, a high amount of social media engagement without being active may not have the same effect. The present study focused specifically on the behavioural relationship between dimensions of social media usage and freedom of expression among undergraduate students in Nigerian universities in Oyo State unlike the previous studies which were focused on political participation, constitutional regulation and institutional policy. The study's findings extend the literature with new empirical evidence of social media engagement as the most important determinant of freedom of expression, filling in conceptual, methodological and geographical gaps that were found in previous studies.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study looked at the impact of social media usage on the freedom of expression of undergraduates in Nigerian universities in Oyo State. The results showed that social media usage is significantly related to

students' freedom of expression, and that the three dimensions of social media usage (frequency, engagement, exposure) together account for a considerable variance in students' freedom of expression. Of these dimensions, the highest and sole positive significant predictor of free expression was social media engagement, meaning that students who use social media to engage with others, share opinions, and participate in online discussion are more likely to have freedom of expression. Conversely, frequent use of social media alone was found to have a slight negative effect, while exposure to social media content did not significantly influence freedom of expression. The study therefore concludes that the quality of students' interaction with social media, rather than the quantity of use or passive exposure to content, is fundamental to promoting meaningful freedom of expression within the university environment. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. University management should promote responsible and interactive use of social media by encouraging students to participate in constructive online discussions, academic forums, and civic engagement activities that foster freedom of expression.
2. Academic staff should integrate digital communication and social media-based learning activities into teaching to enhance students' active engagement, critical thinking, and confidence in expressing informed opinions.
3. Universities should develop clear institutional guidelines and digital literacy programmes that encourage responsible freedom of expression while discouraging online harassment, misinformation, hate speech, and other forms of harmful online behaviour.
4. Students should be encouraged to engage actively rather than passively on social media platforms by sharing ideas, participating in intellectual debates, and collaborating in educational and community discussions that promote meaningful expression.

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