



SOCIAL MEDIA USE, DIGITAL LONELINESS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A MEDIA-SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship among social media use, digital loneliness and political participation among undergraduates in Kogi State, Nigeria, from a media-sociological perspective. A quantitative survey was conducted with a stratified sample of 390 undergraduates across three universities using a structured questionnaire, and the data were analyzed with descriptive frequencies and percentages and inferential tests. Findings show that social media are deeply embedded in students' daily routines for social interaction, education, information and entertainment, with 74.4% spending at least three hours online daily, and that 64.4% report feeling lonely despite prolonged platform use. Reduced face-to-face contact, academic workload, upward social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO) and the virtual displacement of offline interaction emerge as the main factors associated with digital loneliness. Findings further show that online political participation was significantly more common than offline political participation among the respondents. The relationship of social media use and of digital loneliness with political participation was positive and statistically significant ($r = 0.428, p < 0.001$; and $r = 0.215, p < 0.001$ respectively). The study emphasizes the need for balance between virtual engagement and physical interpersonal ties, and recommends institutional digital wellness programs, active campus community engagement, enhanced psychosocial counseling services and civic engagement initiatives that connect online political interest to offline participation.

Keywords: Social Media Use, Digital Loneliness, Political Participation, University Undergraduates, Media Sociology

1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has reshaped social life, interpersonal connection and everyday interaction worldwide. Contemporary social networking environments, most notably WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, and Telegram, have established themselves as primary channels through which individuals construct social identity, establish relational ties, and access and share information. Within university settings, these digital spaces operate not

merely as transactional tools, but as primary arenas for collaborative learning, self-expression, identity negotiation, and socio-cultural integration.

Recent empirical assessments demonstrate unprecedented global expansion in virtual platform adoption. According to DataReportal (2025), active social media users have surpassed 5 billion globally, representing more than 60 percent of the world population. Emerging adults between 18 and 34 years constitute the dominant user demographic, logging over two hours daily on networked applications. However, social theorists increasingly argue that expanded digital

connectivity does not automatically cultivate deeper relational cohesion. On the contrary, over-reliance on virtual interactions may displace physical face-to-face interaction, weaken relational intimacy, and be associated with emotional alienation, a condition conceptualized as digital loneliness.

Digital loneliness embodies the modern paradox of being continuously connected electronically while experiencing profound subjective isolation (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). From a sociological standpoint, loneliness signifies a perceived deficiency in the depth, authenticity, and quality of one's relational matrix rather than mere physical solitude. Weiss (1973) famously differentiated between emotional loneliness (lack of intimate relational bonds) and social loneliness (absence of an integrated social network). Modern digital channels alter these states by introducing superficial online exchanges that substitute for rather than enhance meaningful human bonds.

Undergraduates represent a uniquely vulnerable group regarding digital loneliness. Academic transitions, residential relocations, and evolving peer dynamics coincide with heavy reliance on virtual networking platforms. While these technologies enable cross-geographical communication, continuous exposure to curated virtual personas, upward social comparison, and passive scrolling are frequently associated with psychological discomfort and alienation (Hunt et al., 2018; Primack et al., 2017). Within the Nigerian higher education landscape, expanding mobile broadband access has accelerated social media adoption.

Social media are also reshaping political life. Students use these platforms to obtain political information, discuss public affairs, express opinions, and join or organize campaigns, so that participation increasingly unfolds through networked, personalized channels rather than only through parties and formal associations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Meta-analytic evidence points to a generally positive, though modest, association between social media use and political participation (Boulianne, 2015), and studies of Nigerian university students link social media use to political participation, particularly around elections (Mustapha, Gbonegun, & Mustapha, 2016; Onyechi, 2018). These studies, however, have paid little attention to the emotional and relational condition of the user. Putnam's (2000) account of civic engagement suggests that it matters: participation is sustained by dense social ties,

which are precisely what digital loneliness suggests are lacking.

Regional scholarship has concentrated on academic impacts, online addiction, cyberbullying and, separately, political participation, leaving the sociological link between social media use, digital loneliness and political participation under-researched. This inquiry addresses that gap from a media-sociological perspective, which treats social media not merely as communication tools but as social institutions that reorganize relationships and, through them, civic life. It analyzes the experiences of undergraduates across public universities in Kogi State, Nigeria.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the intended role of digital platforms in promoting social cohesion and civic engagement, growing evidence indicates that intensive virtual engagement frequently operates alongside heightened emotional distress, social detachment, and subjective loneliness among university students. Existing literature on Nigerian tertiary institutions has addressed internet addiction, academic distraction, cybercrime and the political uses of social media largely as separate concerns. Consequently, little is known about how digital communication is related to relational depth within indigenous socio-cultural contexts, or whether the loneliness that accompanies heavy use is related to students' political participation.

Students across universities in Kogi State increasingly depend on virtual networks for academic collaboration, social expression and access to political information. However, the extent to which this dependence is associated with social inclusion and political participation, as against emotional isolation and political disengagement, remains unexamined. The lack of localized empirical research restricts the ability of academic administrators, student affairs counselors, civic educators and mental health professionals to design targeted digital wellness and civic engagement strategies. This study directly addresses this issue by investigating social media use, digital loneliness and political participation among undergraduates at Prince Abubakar Audu University (PAAU), Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH), and Kogi State University, Kabba (KSU, Kabba).

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this investigation is to evaluate the relationship among social media use, digital loneliness and political participation among undergraduates in Kogi State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the structural patterns and frequency of social media usage among university students in Kogi State.
2. Evaluate the relationship between social media engagement patterns and experiences of digital loneliness.
3. Identify the underlying sociological factors associated with digital loneliness among undergraduates within the study area.
4. Assess the level and forms of political participation among undergraduates and examine how it relates to social media use and digital loneliness.

4. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Conceptualizing Digital Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as a subjective psychological state resulting from a cognitive discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Digital loneliness represents the modern iteration of this experience, characterized by persistent emotional isolation and perceived relational deficit despite continuous engagement with digital communication devices and social media platforms (Nowland et al., 2018). Although digital tools enable instantaneous communication, virtual channels frequently lack the non-verbal cues, sensory richness, and immediate empathy inherent in physical interactions (Kross et al., 2021). Consequently, heavy reliance on virtual exchanges may leave individuals feeling emotionally unfulfilled.

4.2 Political Participation

Political participation refers to activity intended to influence government action, either directly or by shaping the choice of those who make public policy (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). It includes conventional acts such as registering and voting, attending campaign events, and contacting officials, as well as online acts such as discussing politics on social platforms, sharing political content, and joining digital campaigns. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe the

latter as connective action, in which personalized content sharing across social networks stands in for the organizational coordination that traditionally mobilized collective action. Verba et al. (1995) further show that participation depends on resources, motivation, and recruitment through social networks, which makes relational isolation directly relevant to political engagement.

4.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Formulated by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), Uses and Gratifications Theory conceptualizes media consumers as active agents who deliberately select specific media channels to satisfy psychological and social needs (e.g., information seeking, entertainment, interpersonal connection). In university settings, students utilize platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram for academic collaboration and peer socialization, and also to follow political events and express opinions; Onyechi (2018) found that cognitive, social and tension-release needs motivated students' social media use during the 2015 political campaigns. However, UGT highlights that when digital channels fail to fulfill deeper emotional expectations, a gratification deficit may arise, which is consistent with subjective isolation despite active usage.

4.4 Social Capital Theory (SCT)

Popularized by Putnam (2000) and rooted in works by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), Social Capital Theory asserts that social networks possess structural value, offering support, trust, and mutual reciprocity. Putnam distinguishes between 'bonding' social capital (deep, emotionally supportive ties) and 'bridging' social capital (broader, superficial connections). While social media efficiently expands bridging social capital, it may weaken bonding social capital where shallow virtual exchanges replace intimate, face-to-face contact, which is consistent with greater vulnerability to digital loneliness. Because Putnam's central concern was civic engagement, the theory also predicts that weakened bonding ties may weaken the networks through which students are drawn into political activity, while bridging ties may still expose them to political information and mobilization (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Mustapha et al., 2016).

4.5 A Media-Sociological Perspective

A media-sociological perspective treats social media not merely as tools of communication but as social institutions that reorganize how relationships are

formed, sustained and mobilized. Read together, the frameworks above suggest a linked account. The gratifications students seek are expected to be reflected in how they use social media; patterns of use may be related to the balance of bridging and bonding social capital; that balance may be related to the experience of digital loneliness; and both access to political information and the strength of social ties may be related to political participation. The study accordingly treats social media use as the main predictor variable, and digital loneliness and political participation as outcome variables of interest, although the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference.

5. Empirical Review

5.1 Social Media Use and Loneliness

Recent international and local empirical research underscores the complex relationship between social media engagement and mental well-being. Hunt et al. (2018) conducted an experimental trial with 143 undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania, establishing that restricting daily social media usage to 30 minutes significantly decreased baseline loneliness and depressive symptoms. Similarly, Lin et al. (2025) surveyed 322 college students to examine passive social media consumption, demonstrating that indirect exposure to curated online content heightens Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and vicarious distress, indirectly compounding depressive states.

In recent international research, Aksakallı, Bayzan, and Uludaşdemir (2026) demonstrated a direct positive correlation between daily virtual platform engagement and online loneliness metrics among university students. Furthermore, Wu, Feng, and Zhang (2024) conducted a longitudinal assessment showing a reciprocal relationship between loneliness and problematic platform usage: elevated loneliness is associated with excessive platform reliance, which in turn is associated with continued emotional isolation, possibly through the displacement of offline social interaction. Complementing these findings, Ye and Ho (24) emphasized that offline social capital buffers against digital isolation, whereas low physical social support is associated with stronger negative psychological outcomes of online engagement.

5.2 Social Media Use and Political Participation

Evidence on social media and political participation is more often positive. A meta-analysis by Boulianne

(2015) reported a generally positive, though modest, association between social media use and participation. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) found that using social media for news was positively related to social capital, civic engagement and political participation. In Nigeria, Mustapha, Gbonegun, and Mustapha (2016) surveyed youths at two universities in Ilorin and concluded that social media enhanced their social capital and political participation, particularly during national elections. Onyechi (2018) similarly reported, from a survey of 588 University of Ibadan students, a significant relationship between social media exposure patterns and participation in the 2015 political campaigns.

5.3 Research Gap

Taken together, the literature suggests that social media can both mobilize and isolate. Studies of loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2024) and studies of political participation (Boulianne, 2015; Onyechi, 2018) have, however, largely proceeded separately. Existing studies identified for this review have not directly examined the relationship among social-media use, digital loneliness and political participation among university students in Kogi State. This study addresses that gap.

6. Research Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative survey design to examine social media use, digital loneliness and political participation across three public universities in Kogi State, Nigeria: Prince Abubakar Audu University (PAAU, Anyigba), Confluence University of Science and Technology (CUSTECH, Osara), and Kogi State University, Kabba (KSU, Kabba). The combined target population comprised 43,000 registered undergraduates. Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula with a 5% margin of error, the baseline sample was calculated as $n = N / [1 + N(e^2)] = 43,000 / [1 + 43,000(0.05^2)] = 43,000 / 108.5 \approx 396.3$, which was rounded to 396 respondents. The sample was stratified by institution and allocated across the three institutions proportionally, with participants selected via stratified random sampling based on faculty and study level. Although 396 questionnaires were distributed, 390 were correctly completed and returned, representing a valid response rate of 98.5%. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and Pearson correlation analysis.

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire measuring social media use patterns, perceived digital loneliness and its sociological correlates on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). The questionnaire also contained a separate political-participation scale of 6 items measuring both online and offline participation, including voter registration, voting, political discussion on social media, sharing or reposting political content, attendance at rallies, campaign events or town hall meetings, and participation in campaigns, protests or advocacy activities. Responses were measured on the same five-point Likert scale. Items were coded and summed to

obtain an overall political-participation score, with higher scores indicating greater participation. The instrument was reviewed by 3 experts in mass communication, sociology and research methodology, and a pilot test involving 30 students outside the study sample produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. Data were collected between January and February 2026. Participation was voluntary; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and strict anonymity and confidentiality procedures were maintained throughout.

7. Data Presentation and Statistical Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile and Usage Characteristics of Respondents (N = 390)

Gender		
Male	201	51.5%
Female	189	48.5%
Age Group		
16–20 years	142	36.4%
21–25 years	174	44.6%
26–30 years	58	14.9%
31 years and above	16	4.1%
Institution		
PAAU, Anyigba	158	40.5%
CUSTECH, Osara	132	33.8%
KSU, Kabba	100	25.6%
Faculty Distribution		
Social Sciences	110	28.2%
Sciences	98	25.1%
Management Sciences	82	21.0%
Arts & Humanities	65	16.7%
Education	35	9.0%
Daily Social Media Usage		
Less than 1 hour	22	5.6%
1–2 hours	78	20.0%

3–4 hours	143	36.7%
More than 4 hours	147	37.7%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Note: Percentages may not sum to exactly 100% because of rounding. Respondents spending at least three hours daily on social media numbered 290 (143 + 147), or 74.4%.

Table 2: Patterns and Motivations of Social Media Engagement

Daily platform usage	248 (63.6%)	101 (25.9%)	21 (5.4%)	15 (3.8%)	5 (1.3%)
Multiple hours spent online daily	162 (41.5%)	128 (32.8%)	54 (13.8%)	32 (8.2%)	14 (3.6%)
Primary channel for friends/family contact	179 (45.9%)	134 (34.4%)	38 (9.7%)	27 (6.9%)	12 (3.1%)
Regular source for news and information	132 (33.8%)	141 (36.2%)	67 (17.2%)	35 (9.0%)	15 (3.8%)
Frequent academic/educational usage	118 (30.3%)	152 (39.0%)	71 (18.2%)	34 (8.7%)	15 (3.8%)
Entertainment as main usage driver	144 (36.9%)	127 (32.6%)	58 (14.9%)	42 (10.8%)	19 (4.9%)
Regular access to multiple platforms	201 (51.5%)	116 (29.7%)	41 (10.5%)	23 (5.9%)	9 (2.3%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3: Perceived Impact of Social Media Usage on Digital Loneliness

Feel lonely despite prolonged platform use	108 (27.7%)	143 (36.7%)	72 (18.5%)	45 (11.5%)	22 (5.6%)
Increased online use reduces felt connection	98 (25.1%)	65 (16.7%)	68 (17.4%)	71 (18.2%)	88 (22.6%)
Prefer virtual over face-to-face interaction	132 (33.8%)	94 (24.1%)	67 (17.2%)	58 (14.9%)	39 (10.0%)
Feel isolated due to online social comparison	76 (19.5%)	89 (22.8%)	92 (23.6%)	78 (20.0%)	55 (14.1%)
Online activity reduces physical family/friend time	141 (36.2%)	129 (33.1%)	56 (14.4%)	41 (10.5%)	23 (5.9%)
Emotional disconnection despite active usage	112 (28.7%)	138 (35.4%)	64 (16.4%)	52 (13.3%)	24 (6.2%)
Rely on social media to cope with loneliness	104 (26.7%)	71 (18.2%)	66 (16.9%)	87 (22.3%)	87 (22.3%)

Excessive use leads to feeling excluded from physical activities	48 (12.3%)	96 (24.6%)	102 (26.2%)	74 (19.0%)	70 (17.9%)
Difficulty building offline ties due to screen time	88 (22.6%)	74 (19.0%)	105 (26.9%)	83 (21.3%)	40 (10.3%)
Overall usage contributes to loneliness/isolation	97 (24.9%)	81 (20.8%)	113 (29.0%)	63 (16.2%)	36 (9.2%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4: Sociological Factors Associated with Digital Loneliness

Lack of physical interaction fuels online isolation	152 (39.0%)	36 (9.2%)	54 (13.8%)	128 (32.8%)	20 (5.1%)
Heavy academic workload limits social contact	138 (35.4%)	121 (31.0%)	67 (17.2%)	43 (11.0%)	21 (5.4%)
Low campus activity participation creates loneliness	118 (30.3%)	134 (34.4%)	72 (18.5%)	45 (11.5%)	21 (5.4%)
Poor family communication increases virtual isolation	96 (24.6%)	107 (27.4%)	88 (22.6%)	62 (15.9%)	37 (9.5%)
Few close university friendships foster detachment	104 (26.7%)	58 (14.9%)	81 (20.8%)	112 (28.7%)	35 (9.0%)
Social comparison on platforms heightens loneliness	122 (31.3%)	105 (26.9%)	78 (20.0%)	54 (13.8%)	31 (7.9%)
Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) elevates isolation	129 (33.1%)	76 (19.5%)	51 (13.1%)	98 (25.1%)	36 (9.2%)
Limited peer social support drives loneliness	115 (29.5%)	30 (7.7%)	52 (13.3%)	124 (31.8%)	69 (17.7%)
Virtual displacement of face-to-face time creates loneliness	141 (36.2%)	117 (30.0%)	63 (16.2%)	46 (11.8%)	23 (5.9%)
Quality of offline relationships influences overall loneliness	52 (13.3%)	121 (31.0%)	17 (4.4%)	168 (43.1%)	32 (8.2%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5: Patterns of Political Participation among Respondents (N = 390)

I am registered to vote (I hold a permanent voter's card)	148 (37.9%)	92 (23.6%)	35 (9.0%)	71 (18.2%)	44 (11.3%)
I voted in the last election for which I was eligible	121 (31.0%)	85 (21.8%)	42 (10.8%)	82 (21.0%)	60 (15.4%)
I regularly discuss political issues on social media	168 (43.1%)	112 (28.7%)	45 (11.5%)	41 (10.5%)	24 (6.2%)

I share or repost political content on social media	154 (39.5%)	125 (32.1%)	48 (12.3%)	39 (10.0%)	24 (6.2%)
I have attended a political rally, campaign event or town hall meeting	62 (15.9%)	78 (20.0%)	51 (13.1%)	118 (30.3%)	81 (20.8%)
I have taken part in a political campaign, protest or advocacy activity (online or offline)	89 (22.8%)	95 (24.4%)	58 (14.9%)	88 (22.6%)	60 (15.4%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

To examine the relationships among social media use, digital loneliness and political participation, a Pearson correlation was conducted on the scale scores. The result showed a positive moderate relationship between social media use and political participation, $r = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, the relationship was statistically significant at the 0.05 level, and the null hypothesis of no relationship was rejected. Digital loneliness was also positively and significantly related to political participation, $r = 0.215$, $p < 0.001$. Because the survey is cross-sectional, these results describe associations and do not establish causal effects.

8. Discussion of Findings

The empirical findings reveal extensive social media adoption among university undergraduates in Kogi State. Some 74.4% of participants spend at least three hours daily on social media across multiple platforms, utilizing these tools for academic collaboration, social contact, and entertainment. These patterns are consistent with international observations by Aksakalli et al. (2026) and Wu et al. (2024), suggesting that virtual networking is thoroughly integrated into student routines. While platforms offer key functional utilities, high engagement intensity may be associated with disruptions to traditional face-to-face relational structures.

Crucially, the data suggest that extensive digital connectivity does not, on its own, protect against emotional detachment. A notable 64.4% of respondents report feeling lonely despite prolonged online activity, while 64.1% describe persistent emotional disconnection. These results support the findings of Wu et al. (2024) and Aksakalli et al. (2026), consistent with

the view that virtual interactions often lack the empathetic depth necessary for genuine relational satisfaction. Heavy reliance on social-media platforms may function as a coping response while also being associated with subjective isolation.

From a sociological standpoint, digital loneliness among university undergraduates is associated with a combination of online behaviors and offline structural pressures. Factors such as heavy academic workloads (66.4%), virtual displacement of face-to-face time (66.2%), upward social comparison (58.2%), and Fear of Missing Out (52.6%) are associated with feelings of isolation. These observations align with Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000; Ye & Ho, 2024), suggesting that while social media may expand bridging capital, it may weaken or displace opportunities for deep, face-to-face bonding, which is important for mental and emotional well-being.

Table 5 shows the pattern of political participation among the respondents. Regarding online participation, 71.8% agreed that they regularly discuss political issues on social media and 71.6% that they share or repost political content. Regarding offline participation, 61.5% agreed that they are registered to vote, 52.8% that they voted in the last election for which they were eligible, 35.9% that they had attended a rally, campaign event or town hall meeting, and 47.2% that they had taken part in a campaign, protest or advocacy activity. Online participation was therefore notably more common than offline political participation.

The results suggest that heavy social media use is associated with higher political participation ($r = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$), and that students who report stronger digital

loneliness also participate more in political activities, particularly in online channels ($r = 0.215$, $p < 0.001$). Because the design is cross-sectional, these findings indicate association only.

These findings are consistent with Mustapha, Gbonegun, and Mustapha (2016) and Onyechi (2018), who reported that social media use is related to students' political participation. In Social Capital terms (Putnam, 2000), because online participation exceeds offline participation, weak bonding ties may limit the movement from online political interest to face-to-face action; however, bridging ties created via digital channels effectively expose students to political information and digital mobilization. From a Uses and Gratifications standpoint, students actively utilize social media to fulfill cognitive and information-seeking needs regarding national and local public affairs, as confirmed by the high news and information consumption items in Table 2.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that digital loneliness among university undergraduates in Kogi State is a complex sociological condition associated with structural lifestyle factors, academic pressures, and modern virtual communication habits. While social platforms provide valuable communication, educational and political information tools, heavy reliance on virtual interactions may displace physical engagement and weaken emotional support systems. Regarding political participation, the findings show that students engage actively in political discourse, with digital platforms serving as the primary vehicle for political expression. Online forms of participation were significantly more common than offline forms. The analysis further indicated that social media use was significantly related

to political participation ($r = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$), while digital loneliness was also significantly related to political participation ($r = 0.215$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that online political visibility should not automatically be interpreted as broad offline civic engagement. Addressing digital loneliness requires balanced strategies that harmonize online engagement with rich, face-to-face community connections.

Based on these conclusions, the following structural recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutional Digital Wellness Initiatives: Universities should implement orientation modules and digital literacy workshops that encourage healthy screen-time habits and mindful platform usage.
2. Campus Community Enrichment: University administrations should fund diverse physical social activities, sports leagues, and peer mentorship networks to strengthen face-to-face student bonds.
3. Enhanced Counseling Services: Student counseling centers should incorporate specialized protocols for addressing digital fatigue, social isolation, and FOMO.
4. Student Self-Regulation: Students should proactively balance their daily schedules by setting boundaries on social media consumption and prioritizing in-person social interactions.
5. Civic Engagement Initiatives: Student affairs units, student associations and civic organizations should create campus debates, voter-registration drives, town-hall meetings, student-government forums and non-partisan civic education programmes that convert online political interest into informed offline participation.

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