

**Boys want to ‘Hustle’; Girls want to look like ‘Slay Mamas’: Examining the Effects  
of Instagram Usage on mental health of Adolescents in Nigeria**

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***Abstract***

This study examined the influence of Instagram usage on depression and anxiety in emerging adults in Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Thirty-two young males and females who are active Instagram users were selected through a snowballing sampling method. While QDA miner lite version 5 was used in sorting and organizing the data, Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used for the analysis. Result showed important gender differences in daily lived experiences of adolescents using Instagram. Although both gender were attracted to Instagram photos, text posts and videos, girls felt the need to look like the ‘slay mamas’ they see on Instagram. The pressure to look like these images sometimes makes many of the girls feel ‘inadequate’ and unhappy about their body and status. The boys on the other hand, felt motivated by the images of male celebrities and other successful peers. Consequently, most of the boys stated that they always thought of ‘hustling’ (being entrepreneurial) and hoped to ‘hammer’ (become successful) with time. The practical implications of the findings are discussed and ways to harnessing the positive effects of Instagram are suggested.

***Keywords: Instagram effects, gender, adolescents, mental health***

**Introduction**

Mental health issues are global problem. So far, over 300 million people, 4.4% of the world’s population, experience some form of depression (Sorsha, 2018). The worrying statistic, according to Sorsha (2018), is an indication of abroad prevalence of mental health issues around the globe. In Africa for instance, concerns about mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, suicide and addiction have drastically increased. In addition, there has been a projection that as Africa’s population increases over the next three decades, the pressures on youths, who across the region are already grappling to earn a livelihood in highly competitive labor markets, are likely to multiply and put many at the mercy of psychological problems as they fail to fulfill their ambitions (British Council, 2018; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2017). Although there is no reliable estimate of the proportion of mental health issues in Nigeria, local tabloids and the social media are awash with incidences of chronic depression and suicide thoughts and acts.

On the other hand, the widespread prevalence of mental health problems have in part, been linked to social networking sites (SNSs) use. Several studies have associated SNSs use with such health concerns as anxiety, depression, and psychological stress in emerging adults (e.g., Dogan&Ozan, 2017; Khodarahimi&Fathi, 2017; Khodarahimi&Rasti, 2016; O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Ozimek&Bierhoff, 2019; Pierce, 2009). As an example, Ozimek and Bierhoff (2019) found that social media use has a significant negative effect on mental health. Khodarahimi and Fathi (2017) conducted a study and reported that those who do not utilize social media platforms have less anxiety and other categories of mental health disorder than those who use social media.

The argument on the impact of social media on mental health is still ongoing and remains unresolved. For example, Coyne et al. (2019) conducted a study and reported that social media use was not significantly related to mental health. Additionally, Seabrook, et. al. (2016) social media use rather assist people to cope with events that could potentially make them vulnerable to mental health challenges. Yet, Keles, et al., (2019) reported that social media use plays an important role in triggering mental health disorder.

So far, qualitative studies on the influence of SNSs use and anxiety and depression are scanty. Existing qualitative investigations (e.g., Calancie, Ewing, Narducci, Horgan& Khalid-Khan 2017; O’Reilly et al., 2018), which had negative outcomes, have only reflected insights from non-African or non-Nigerian societies.

As yet and to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, there is no qualitative research examining the impact of SNSs on anxiety and depression in emerging adults in a place like Nigeria. An inquiry of this nature is particularly important in a country where out of the 98.39 million Nigerian internet users, 54% access the Internet on a daily basis while only 12% (24 million) have active social media accounts (Udodiong, 2019). Indigenous empirical studies have also revealed a high social media usage among young persons in Nigeria (e.g., Buhari, Ahmad & Hadi Ashara, 2014; Nwangwa, Yonlonfoun & Omotere, 2014; Omekwu, Eke&Odoh, 2014; Wickramanayake & Muhammad, 2018). On the other hand, an estimated 20%–30% of the Nigerian population is believed to suffer from mental health issues (Onyemelukwe, 2016). This, according to Suleiman (2016) is a very significant number considering Nigeria’s huge population of over 200 million. Unfortunately, the perceived correlation between SNSs usage and mental health problems in Nigeria have only been based on assumptions, in place of empirical analysis. In addition, while most studies have focused on establishing the relationship between Facebook and mental health, there have been calls for research into how other SNSs might influence emotional, psychological and social wellbeing.

As a result, the study extends focus beyond Facebook by examining the influence of Instagram usage on depression and anxiety in young people in Lafia, Nasarawa state, Nigeria. As a social media platform, Instagram is a popular social media channels for sharing pictures among friends and other users (Hu et al., 2014). Instagram was launched 2010, and it has since gained acceptance globally (West, 2019). Equally there are over six million Instagram users (67.8% of who are between the ages of 18-34 years) in Nigeria (Napoleoncat, 2019). Regrettably, the Instagram have been identified as the worst SNSs application for mental health and wellbeing, according to #StatusOfMind survey, published by the United Kingdom’s Royal Society for Public Health (Macmillan, 2017). Just like anywhere else, Nigerian youths are exposed to daily Instagram glamour (e.g., exotic cars, designer clothes, endorsement deals, houses, emoticons, “inspirational

stories”, etc.), which many observers have claimed leads users to inaccurately and unrealistically evaluate the lives. Although these claims are compelling, we are yet to empirically understand the association between Instagram usage and mental health. In-depth knowledge of the phenomenon is crucial as it could contribute to public health intervention efforts to tackle the growing mental health crisis. Consequently, the study examined the influence of Instagram usage on depression and anxiety in young women and men in Lafia, Nasarawa state, Nigeria.

### **Methods**

The researchers made use of an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to achieve its goals.

The study population was made up of all adolescents who are active Instagram users in Lafia, Nasarawa state, Nigeria. In getting the sample size from the population universe, the researchers selected thirty-two young males and females, aged 19-25 years, through a snowballing sampling procedure. Because there was no known list of Instagram users who fell into the category we sought, we adopted the snowballing method. In doing this, the researchers bumped into few young persons who admitted that they were regular Instagram users (they also showed IG handles). After enlightening them about the purpose of the study, their phone contacts were obtained and the research team got verbal consent and approval for interviews. For those who could not grant the interviews immediately, later interview dates were booked and interviews were conducted. After interviewing a set of participants, we asked them to refer us to other Instagram users. Through this method the remaining IDI participants were reached and subsequently interviewed. In all, 16 males and 16 females were interviewed.

The researchers also explained to interviewees that other than their time that would be taken in the process of the interview, the study posed no risks or harms to them. They were also told that they could discontinue the interview session at any point they felt uncomfortable to continue. Respondents’ rights were duly observed and respected. For example, the researchers ensured anonymity by identifying respondents using an alphabet and a number: from R1 to R32 (i.e., respondent 1 to 32).

An unstructured in-depth interview guide containing questions that bordered on the research objectives was employed in the course of the study. The interview sessions covered information on respondents’ demographic data. The researchers also used open-ended questions to elicit information concerning the objectives of the study. Interview sessions were conducted with the help of three research assistants (RAs) who we had previously trained on qualitative data collection and management process. Interview sessions took place in public places such as restaurants and shops and in broad day light. During the interview sessions, non-verbal cues were noted. The essence for doing this was to capture all aspects of each session.

At the conclusion of each day of data collection, the researchers and the RAs transcribed and translated field notes and audio recordings of all IDI sessions, wherein appropriate measures were made to preserve the original meaning of what was said. The qualitative analysis software QDA miner lite version 5 was used to assist with documentation and organization of themes and subthemes. This final phase of the analysis involved, putting narrative and data findings together and contextualizing the analysis in relation to the extant literature. The study equally used descriptive statistics to summarize respondents’ demographics. In order to ensure validity, the researchers re-invited the respondents to take a look at the final report of the analysis so that they could check the correctness and accuracy of what had been interpreted. As Brink (1993, p. 37) justified the use of this

technique (also known as member checking): “This ensures that the researcher and the informant are viewing the data consistently”.

## **Results**

### **Characteristics of the Respondents**

A total of 32 IDIs were conducted. The median age of the respondents was 22.3 years. All the respondents were single. Also, majority (88.2%) of the respondents were students in different higher institutions in and outside the state. The remaining respondents (11.8%) said they were awaiting their senior secondary school certificate results that would hopefully get them into the higher institution of their choice. Their mean Instagram usage was 13.2 hours daily. Most (92.0%) respondents equally admitted following several celebrities, Instagram influencers and even their friends and admirers on the Instagram.

### **Instagram is Realer than you think**

Many respondents, regardless of gender difference identified the Instagram experience as nothing different from their day to day affair. They also implied that being on Instagram affords them the opportunity to meet different people, share each other’s experiences and be abreast of what is ‘trending.’ As one male respondent put it,

The Instagram is an interesting place to be...it is realer than you think or believe. It is just a fun place to always hang [out], you know you get to meet different people by following their IG handle, you get to see what they are doing especially if they are people you idolize or celebrities or people you really like: You see how they are doing their thing; it brings you closer to them. I can also allow people to have an idea of how I am doing my own thing (R11, Male 22 years).

Another respondent spoke about how real life relationships can become so complex between herself and her friends. She further made comparison between her real life friends, who have now become small in number and her Instagram friends, who she perceived as more real, with no ‘drama’. According to her:

The Instagram is so real to me... forget what people are saying about it. You know in reality you can hardly find great friends in real life: all they do is gossip and backbite about you every now and then and behind your back. I have actually being through a lot of toxic relationships with many of my girl friends and all it always amounts to trouble. But with my friends on IG, such toxicity is limited as I don’t really communicate with them except to see and copy what I like and drop what I don’t like (R2 female, 20 years).

Another male respondent felt exactly the same way as the respondent above. The male respondent thought that the Instagram tend to give people the validation they couldn’t get in real life. The respondent also spoke about the toxicity in real life relationships and how the Instagram experience makes this go away:

You see, we have bad friends with very negative vibes around you. Sometimes, they don’t even want you to make it in life, they pretend to like or care about you but in real the sense, they don’t care if you are dead. My [university] admission story is a big lesson... they were all happy that I did not pass my JAMB twice and they couldn’t even hide their feelings... with social media even Instagram, those things help me while away time. Although I no longer have much of the negative friends, I have people following me and my rap skits on the Instagram and it is a good feeling (R7, Male 21 years).

Many respondents also felt the need to receive validation they couldn't get in their real life relationships. When probed further (about the motivation for seeking validation on Instagram), majority of the respondents said they always hoped that posting images and stories about their lives would elicit flattery comments and likes, which actually made them feel better. As one respondent put it, "it makes me feel cool, like wow."

The goal is to be better: But the process can be depressing

Although most respondents did not want to be labeled or described as 'copy cats', they felt that the goal of being an Instagrammer was not only for the experience but also to become better. While self-improvement was the ultimate goal, they were quick to point out that the journey of becoming better as an individual can be draining at times. There were notable gender differences in the responses under this theme. As an example, many young women felt the pressure to look like their fellow females whom they idolized or liked on the Instagram. Many young women equally hoped they could look 'sexy' or as attractive as the Instagram images. One female respondent commented about how a woman who spends 'quality' time on Instagram should 'never be caught' with flaws on her face and in her dressing:

let me tell you, what I personally see on IG daily is just like a motivation to me to look the best... even though some call them 'slay mamas'; I see them as an inspiration because they keep you on your toes to always look fabulous: your make up, your wears, shoes and everything must be on point... you should not be caught off guard (R9, female, 22 years).

Continuing, the respondent was quick to note that while deciding to look like others seen on Instagram was very easy to think about; using the exact quality of adornments and accessories was clearly difficult to achieve. Although the respondent claimed that she had never been affected by her inability to afford these adornments, she believed that other young girls like her have been affected. In her words:

Although me I can speak for myself, I can't say of other young girls. I believe that their inability to get these things to use on their skin or body can make them not to feel okay about their bodies, especially when they cannot do anything to buy these things (R20, female, 24 years).

Other respondents also spoke about the influence of Instagram images on their body image. For many, Instagram images of certain female celebrities and other popular figures made them wish they had similar body size and physical features like the women they admired on Instagram. As one respondent said:

I wish I have the kind of thigh, tummy and buttocks that my favourite woman in the world [on Instagram] has. She is extremely perfect. I don't just know why... I wish my tummy is that flat and my bum that sizeable, it will really feel great... but now I just really feel inadequate (R15, female, 23 years).

Another female respondent spoke about the effect of a certain female celebrity (who has more than 4 million followers and had credited plastic surgery for her curvy shape) on her:

The fact that Tonto Dikeh [a popular Nollywood celebrity] was able to transform her body looking so great, tells me that nothing is impossible... The only issue I have is that you know, you need money to do and maintain these things. It is not easy... it makes me feel bad sometimes (R25, female 22 years).

Female respondents also suggested that thinking about the 'perfect' body image of these well-known individuals make them anxious to the extent that some of them went as far as

making comparisons to other women they see around them in real life. The effect of such comparison could sometimes be devastating for those who 'found' that their body parts were not even as 'beautiful' as those around them. This was how one of the respondents put it,

Knowing that I don't look as attractive and beautiful as those I see and admire on Instagram is something I can actually deal with because they are probably richer and have money to take care of themselves. But when I go out and see that others around me or my area tend to look better than me either in dressing or body shape, I kind of feel ashamed about everything (R18, female, 22 years).

The young males on the other hand, felt motivated by the images of male celebrities and other successful peers. They also stated that seeing pictures of exotic cars, nice houses, and other successful stories made them hopeful. Consequently, most of the male respondents stated that they always thought of 'hustling' (being entrepreneurial) and hoped to 'hammer' (become successful) with time. As one of the male respondents commented;

Each time I am on the Instagram seeing my favorite people doing their things, I am just motivated and I am like I need to buckle up and hustle up to make it. The fact that people show their successes on the Instagram may be to show off but I believe their so called show off can serve as some sort of motivation for some of us. So, for me it depends on what your interpretation of what you see (R30, Male, 22 years).

Another respondent who is an aspiring artiste (rapper) discussed how he was always inspired by what he saw on the Instagram and how such experiences have served as motivation for him to always put out rap skits on the Instagram: "As an aspiring rapper, I am always glued to my IG page because it keeps me going and encourages me to always put out skits on Instagram" (R7, Male 21 years). Continuing, the aspiring rapper believed that his consistency and the continuous inspirations he gets from his daily Instagram use will lead him to success soon. According to him, "Life na turn by turn and consistency is the key. [If] I continue this way, I hope to hammer in due time". On the contrary only a few male respondents felt unhappy and depressed about their situation each time they come across images, videos and stories that tend to depict glamorous lifestyles of other Instagram users. As one of the participants put it,

Life on Instagram is something else, even though I can't spend a day without checking any of my social media handles, it sometimes have a negative toll on me... because I tend to reflect on my life and how old I am and I have not achieved anything... yet I see some small boys on Instagram flaunting wealth... It is just calls for reflection even that sad mood and afterwards I am back to normal (R10, male, 25 years).

Another male respondent declared that despite having the knowledge that Instagram 'life' are somewhat faked, he still feels pressured to seek such standard by any means possible. According to him;

Forget that the life on Instagram is fake sometimes, the fact that people recognize you when you pretend to have hammered, is the real deal. As you get to be consistent, you might make it along the way. If I see any opportunity, my brother, I will take it. Have you forgotten Shatta Bandle [the fake Ghanaian billionaire]... he don blow [he is now successful] now (R24, male, 24 years).

### **Discussion**

The study examined the influence of Instagram usage on depression and anxiety in young women and men in Lafia, Nasarawa state, Nigeria. Following analysis of data, findings showed that many respondents, irrespective of gender difference identified the Instagram

experience as nothing different from their day to day affair. In other words, Instagram experience is 'real' in the views of respondents. Respondents also noted the contributions of celebrities and Instagram "influencers" to the realness of the Instagram experience. One plausible explanation for such reaction was what Cherry (2019) described as the rise of "influencers", which has greatly affected how people view reality through the lens of Instagram. Also, because celebrities who are adored by fans use the Instagram to share details or important events in their private lives, users get to feel closer to them. The fact that celebrities can also be reached through DMs (direct messages) makes the Instagram experience more real to users. These responses reflect some important implications, which are that many Instagram users in the sample were withdrawn from real life relationships due to the alternative forms of friendships that the Instagram appear to guarantee. In addition, although the Instagram usage does not prevent people from criticism, respondents believed that it gave a sense of validation about themselves and what they do. The findings therefore highlight the significance of Instagram on adolescent.

More importantly, the study found that although both gender were attracted to Instagram photos, text posts and videos, girls felt the need to look like the 'slay mamas' they see on Instagram. The pressure to look like these images sometimes makes many of the girls feel 'inadequate' and unhappy about their body and status. The responses from the women in the study indicated that Instagram exposure to people they greatly admire made them depressed and anxious about their body. This outcome is consistent with existing qualitative studies (e.g., Calancie, et al., 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2018), which showed that exposure to Instagram images had negative outcomes on adolescents and young people's mental health. Although the impact can be said to be short term, there are indications that continuous exposure may likely engender long term impact. However, this is so far a claim and would require longitudinal qualitative research to buttress such.

The boys on the other hand, felt motivated by the images of male celebrities and other successful peers. Consequently, most of the boys stated that they always thought of 'hustling' (being entrepreneurial) and hoped to 'hammer' (become successful) with time. The findings corroborate outcomes from studies like that of Baker and Jeske (2015) who found that participants who engaged more frequently in online activities also reported significantly higher levels of assertiveness and lower levels of anxiety. Put together, the gendered difference identified in the effects of Instagram usage on young people show that SNSs such as the one under study could have positive or negative influence on mental health issues. The review of Seabrook et al. (2016) has earlier confirmed these findings. This result has two broad implications. First, the result of this study has public health implications because mental health issue is a growing concern in Nigeria and many other countries. It has now been linked with SNS usage. People have also called for restraints with regards to how young people allow themselves to be negatively influenced by SNSs usage. Therefore when young individuals such as those we have studied use the SNSs without precaution (i.e., knowing how to set boundaries between reality and fiction), they are predisposed to depression, anxiety, stress, etc. Therefore, by providing empirical as well as theoretical insights into how Instagram usage is linked to mental health crisis, this study provides a crucial understanding of another dimension as to the likely cause of mental health issues.

The same way we found in the study that Instagram influencers and celebrities somehow construct what is ideal and real through their Instagram pages. We also found that such 'important' people have set ideal standards about certain topics (success, possession, beauty, body image, wealth, etc.) that young people are concerned about. In addition, the findings of the study have confirmed that Instagram users were indeed active in the

process as they make meanings out of what they were exposed to on the Instagram. This is what the theory calls agenda melding.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the present study, we concluded that Instagram experience is 'real' in the views of respondents and could lead to respondents' withdrawal from real-life relationships. The study also concluded that females were more likely to feel depressed and anxious about their bodies than males. In addition, Instagram usage could be inspirational, especially for males, thereby lowering their chances of experiencing depression and anxiety.

### **Limitation**

The idea of no work without limitation is not exempted in this study. The first limitation of this study is a limitation to the generalization of the findings. This is because only one state of the federation was used. More states should be included in future studies. The ability to generalize the findings of the study was also limited by the non-probability method through which respondents were selected. Also, this study adopted qualitative research design. This has some limitations like failure to ultimately allow for statistical inferences to be made. Further research endeavours should consider improving on these gaps.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Youth agencies and other relevant agencies (i.e., National Orientation agency) under the state and non-state actors should embark on awareness raising and sensitization programs as well as outreach to increase youth' objective knowledge about how to be safe when using Instagram and other SNSs.
2. SNSs influencers and other social media agenda setters should be tasked to play advocacy role by enlightening young people about the risks and dangers of believing everything displayed in the virtual world. By doing this, they may help to guide vulnerable youths from making false assumptions that could lead to mental health concerns.
3. Public health practitioners should also be tasked to expand their strategies to tackling mental health issues to include addressing young people's SNSs usage. If intervention programs incorporate guiding young people to safely use SNSs, it may have some impact on growing incidence of depression and anxiety among youths.

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