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SOCIAL MEDIA REJECTION SENSITIVITY: IMPACT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES.

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of socio-demographic factors - gender, frequency and duration of social media use - on social media rejection sensitivity among undergraduate students. Using a descriptive survey research design, a sample of 720 students was drawn from a population of 15,732 third year students insix Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria. The Social Media Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (SMRS-Q) was employed for data collection. Data analysis involved the use of mean, t-test and ANOVA statistics. Results indicate that students showedsignificant sensitivity to aspects of online activities that reflect criticism and exclusion, and gender was not a significant factor across the dimensions of social media rejection sensitivity. Furthermore, frequency of social media use was a significant factor in all dimensions of social media sensitivity but the behavioral dimension, whereas the duration of social media use was a significant factor on all dimensions but on the emotional social media rejection sensitivity. It was concluded that students were sensitive to some aspects of social media rejections, and that patterns of use of social media could be more significant in impacting students' social media rejection sensitivity than their gender. Recommendations include university-led awareness programmes and social media resilience training to support students' mental health among others.

Keywords: Social media rejection sensitivity, socio-demographic variables, undergraduate students, mental health, Nigeria

Introduction

The need for social acceptance is fundamental to human existence, shaping behavior and influencing interpersonal interactions. According to Roberts and David (2019), beyond basic survival needs such as food, shelter, and education, humans require social acceptance and validation to thrive. Rejection, on the other hand, can lead to profound psychological distress, affecting mental well-being and social functioning. With the advent of social media, these dynamics have evolved, as individuals—particularly undergraduate students—now seek validation through likes, comments, and shares on social platforms. This phenomenon, referred to as social media rejection sensitivity, is defined as the tendency to anxiously expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection in social media interactions, which has become a critical issue influencing the mental health of young adults.

Social rejection itself, described as the perception or experience of being excluded, ostracized, or ignored by others (DeWall & Baumeister, 2013), can lead to negative emotional consequences such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Birkin *et al.,* 2023). The pervasive nature of social media amplifies these experiences, offering constant opportunities for social comparison and validation. For undergraduate students, who are often navigating new social environments and developmental challenges, social media rejection can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Studies have indicated that negative social media experiences—such as receiving fewer likes, negative comments, or experiencing cyberbullying—can be particularly harmful to students already struggling with low self-esteem, pushing them toward social withdrawal and heightened mental health challenges (Drouin, Reining, Flanagan, Carpenter & Toscos, 2018).

Several socio-demographic variables, including gender, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, significantly influence how individuals perceive and respond to social rejection, especially in online environments. Gender, for instance, has been shown to impact sensitivity to social rejection. Peters, Sunderland, Andrews, Rapee and Mattick. (2013) found that female students tend to exhibit higher levels of rejection sensitivity compared to their male counterparts. This heightened sensitivity may stem from gender socialization patterns that emphasize emotional attunement and relational connections for women. As a result, women are more likely to be emotionally affected by limited engagement or negative feedback on social

media, making them particularly susceptible to the psychological consequences of rejection (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk & Kang, 2013). In contrast, male students may demonstrate lower sensitivity, though they are not entirely immune to the effects of online rejection.

Age also plays a critical role in social media rejection sensitivity. Younger students, particularly those in their late teens and early twenties, are at a developmental stage where social validation plays a central role in shaping self-identity (Gao, Assink, Liu, Chan & Ip, 2021). The intense desire for social approval during this life stage makes younger students more vulnerable to the emotional impact of social rejection, particularly in highly visible social spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Older students, on the other hand, may have developed more resilient coping mechanisms, reducing their sensitivity to social rejection, although the impact of social media rejection is not completely absent in this demographic.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is another significant factor influencing social media rejection sensitivity. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may depend more on social media for social connection and validation due to limited access to offline social spaces or extracurricular activities (Lin *et al.*, 2016). For these students, social media rejection can compound existing feelings of marginalization, deepening emotional distress. Conversely, students from higher SES backgrounds may have broader social networks and greater access to support systems, which could mitigate the psychological impact of social media rejection (Perrin, 2018).

Furthermore, cultural background has been shown to affect how social rejection is perceived and internalized. In collectivist cultures, where group harmony and social cohesion are emphasized, individuals may be more sensitive to perceived social rejection as it threatens their sense of belonging within the group (Tan, Forbes & Dahl, 2020). This cultural emphasis on interpersonal relationships heightens the emotional impact of rejection. In contrast, individuals from individualistic cultures, who prioritize personal achievements and self-reliance, may view social rejection as less significant, leading to lower sensitivity in online interactions (Liu Kraines, Massing-Schaffer & Alloy, 2014). However, while these trends are observed, the impact of social media rejection within varying cultural contexts requires deeper exploration.

Despite the wealth of research on rejection sensitivity in face-to-face interactions, there is limited understanding of how socio-demographic factors interact in the context of social media rejection sensitivity. The existing literature has primarily focused on in-person social rejection, with few studies examining how variables like gender, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background influence rejection sensitivity in digital environments. Given the integral role that social media now plays in the lives of undergraduate students, there is a pressing need to explore how gender, frequency and duration of use of social media platforms influence social media rejection sensitivity.

This gap in the literature becomes a lacuna that needs to be bridged. While previous studies have established the link between social rejection and negative psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Schaan, Schulz, Bernstein, Schachinger & Vögele, 2020), there remains a lack of comprehensive research on how socio-demographic factors influence social media rejection sensitivity specifically among undergraduate students. Understanding the relationships between socio-demographic variables and rejection sensitivity is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at supporting vulnerable student populations. Without targeted research, universities and mental health professionals may be ill-equipped to address the growing mental health challenges associated with social media rejection. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by investigating the relationships between socio-demographic variables—gender, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background—and social media rejection sensitivity among undergraduate students.

Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the impact of socio-demographic variables—specifically, gender, frequency, and duration of social media use—on the dimensions of social media rejection sensitivity among undergraduate students. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Identify the specific aspects of social media interactions that undergraduate students are most sensitive about.
2. Analyze how gender, frequency, and duration of social media use influence the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of social media rejection sensitivity among undergraduate students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What specific aspects of social media interactions that undergraduate students are most sensitive about?
2. How do gender, frequency, and duration of social media use influence emotional, cognitive, and behavioral social media rejection sensitivity among undergraduate students?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses will be tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference in emotional, cognitive, or behavioral social media rejection sensitivity based on gender among undergraduate students.

H_{02}: The frequency of social media use does not significantly influence emotional, cognitive, or behavioral dimensions of social media rejection sensitivity.

H_{03}: The duration of social media use does not significantly impact emotional, cognitive, or behavioral dimensions of social media rejection sensitivity.

Methods

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 720 students was selected using a stratified random sampling technique from a population of 15,732 third year students from six Federal universitiesin the South-Eastern region of Nigeria to ensure the representation of different socio-demographic groups, including gender, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. The instrument for data collection was a self-structured questionnaire titled Social Media Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (SMRS-Q), consisting of two sections. Section Aaddresses the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents while Section B assesses their social media rejection sensitivity. A pilot study conducted with 40 students from the Federal University of Benin yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82,

indicating high internal consistency of the instrument. Data collection was conducted over two weeks using research assistants who administered the questionnaires directly to the respondents, ensuring a high response rate. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores were utilized to answer the research questions whereas t-test and ANOVA were used to test the hypotheses at significance level set at 0.05.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Variables

S/N	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	499	70.4
		Female	210	29.6
2	Frequency of Social Media Use	Rarely	17	2.4
		Once in a week	18	2.5
		Twice in a week	13	1.8
		Every day	661	93.2
3	Time Spent on Social Media	less than an hour	581	81.9
		one hour	48	6.8
		more than an hour	80	11.3

Table 1 revealed the demographic variables of the respondents, highlighting the gender distribution, frequency, and duration of social media use among the undergraduate students. The majority of the respondents were male students (70.4%), a good number of students use social media daily (93.2%) whereas as many as 81.9% reported spending less than one hour on social media daily.

Table 2: Mean Item by Item Analysis of Social Media Rejection Sensitivity

S/N	Items	Mean	SD
1	I often worry about how I am perceived by others on social media	2.26	.905
2	I am very sensitive to criticism or exclusion from peers on social media platforms	2.39	.920
3	I feel significant emotional distress when I am ignored or left out on social media	2.12	.857
4	I feel distressed when someone on social media unfollows or unfriends me	1.89	.842
5	I frequently compare my online presence to that of others on social media	1.99	.818

6	I feel dissatisfied with my current social relationships and connections	2.33	.902
7	I am concerned about the possibility of being excluded or rejected on social media	2.00	.810
8	I hesitate to post on social media because I fear negative feedback or rejection	2.07	.885
9	My self-esteem is influenced by the feedback I receive on social media	1.88	.789
10	I feel confident that I have meaningful friendships and social belonging	2.90	.827
11	I stay up late or lose sleep due to worrying about social media rejections	1.75	.713
12	I find it hard to focus and concentrate after being rejected on social media	1.79	.709
13	I feel less motivated to achieve my academic goals after negative social media experiences	1.69	.660
14	My thoughts are consumed by social media criticisms, making it hard to study	1.74	.739
15	I find myself constantly checking social media when I should be studying	2.62	.856
16	I stay up late or lose sleep due to worrying about social media rejections.	1.53	.679
17	I frequently replay negative social media interactions in my mind	1.88	.792
18	I experience intrusive thoughts related to social media rejection	1.78	.741
19	I am preoccupied with my social media interactions even when I should be focusing on academic or cognitive tasks	2.21	.861
20	Often question my own abilities and intelligence based on social media interactions	2.22	.865
21	I struggle to retain information I study for exams and assignments due to my social media engagement	1.98	.838
22	I lash out or act aggressively when I feel rejected on social media	1.62	.658
23	I have trouble controlling my impulse to immediately check social media when I feel excluded	1.86	.795
24	I find it challenging to engage in academic or extracurricular activities when I've had a negative social media experience	1.78	.734
25	Social media rejection has a noticeable impact on my motivation to participate in group activities	1.85	.800
26	I excessively stalk the social media profiles of people who have rejected me online	1.78	.786
27	I hesitate to share my thoughts and opinions in real-life discussions due to concerns about social media rejection	1.94	.820
28	My social media experiences influence my behavior in offline social situations	2.02	.834
29	I often feel a sense of social isolation as a result of social media rejection	1.80	.745
30	Negative feedback on social media affects my willingness to collaborate with others on projects or assignments	1.82	.784
31	I behave in ways aligned with my values when interacting with people online and offline	2.87	.974

Table 2 provides item-by-item mean analysis of social media rejection sensitivity, revealing students' sensitivity to specific aspects of social media interactions. It revealed that 12 items out of 31 were rated highly by the students. Items that had mean of 2.00 and above were perceived as being rated highly by students indicating how sensitive they were regarding that item. Students demonstrated their sensitivity on how they were perceived by others online, to online criticisms of their peers, when they are ignored by their peers online, exclusion online, their online connections, and their sensitive online reflects on their

interactions offline.Table 2 highlight that students show significant sensitivity to aspects of online rejection that reflect criticism and exclusion.

Table 3: t-test on the Mean Differences on the Dimensions of Social Media Rejection Sensitivity Based on Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional Social Media	Male	499	2.19	.56	.551	707	.582
Rejection Sensitivity	Female	210	2.17	.50			
Cognitive Social Media	Male	499	1.96	.53	1.490	707	.137
Rejection Sensitivity	Female	210	1.90	.52			
Behavioral Social Media	Male	499	1.96	.58	1.927	707	.054
Rejection Sensitivity	Female	210	1.87	.57			
Total Social Media Rejection	Male	499	2.04	.51	1.464	707	.144
Sensitivity	Female	210	1.98	.48			

Results from Table 3 show that male undergraduate students had a non-significantly higher mean scores than their female counterparts on emotional social media rejection sensitivity, cognitive social media rejection sensitivity, behavioral social media rejection sensitivity and total social media rejection sensitivity, t (707) = .551, p>.05; t(707) = 1.490, p>.05; t(707) = 1.927, p>.05; t(707) = 1.464, p>.05 respectively.

Table 4: ANOVA Table on Social Media Rejection Sensitivity Based on Frequency and Duration of Social Media Use

Variables	Dimensions	No	Emotional Social Media Rejection Sensitivity		Cognitive Social Media Rejection Sensitivity		Behavioral Social Media Rejection Sensitivity		Total Social Media Rejection Sensitivity)	
			M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Frequency of Use	Rarely	17	2.10	.55	1.78	.46	1.87	.56	1.92	.48
	Once in a week	18	1.89	.46	1.41	.40	1.64	.37	1.63	.38
	Twice in a week	13	2.20	.62	2.19	.90	1.91	.64	2.10	.72
	Every day	661	2.19	.54	1.96	.52	1.94	.58	2.03	.50
F-Value (3,705)			2.789**		7.967**		1.749		4.278**	
Sign.			.040		.000		.156		.005	
	less than an hour	581	2.20	.54	1.98	.51	1.96	.58	2.04	.49

Duration of Use	one hour	48	2.06	.61	1.75	.67	1.82	.58	1.88	.58
	more than an hour	80	2.15	.52	1.8	.51	1.81	.51	1.94	.49
F-Value (2,705)			1.466		5.910**		3.475**		3.835**	
Sign.			.232		0.003		0.032		0.022	

Note: ***=significance <.05; M = mean, SD = standard deviation; No = number*

An ANOVA statistic was used to identify mean differences among the categories of frequency of use and duration of social media use among the students on the dimensions of the social media rejection sensitivity. The result indicated significant differences among the categories of frequency of social media use and emotional social media rejection sensitivity ($F(3, 705) = 2.789$; $p = .040$); cognitive social media rejection sensitivity ($F(3, 705) = 7.967$; $p = .000$); and the total social media rejection sensitivity ($F(3, 705) = 4.278$; $p = .005$). Significant difference was not found between the categories of frequency of social media use and students' behavioral social media rejection sensitivity ($F(3, 705) = 1.749$; p = .156). The post hoc result revealed that significant differences occurred between categories of students who use social media every day and those who use once in a week $p = .030$, on emotional social media rejection sensitivity; between those who use once in a week and twice in a week $p = .000$, those who use once in a week and those who use every day$p = .000$ on cognitive social media rejection sensitivity. On the total social media rejection sensitivity, post hoc showed significant difference between the categories of students who use every day and those who use social media once in a week $p = .004$

Regarding the duration of use of social media, ANOVA statistics showed significant difference among the groups on cognitive social media rejection sensitivity ($F(2, 705) = 5.910$; $p = .003$), behavioural social media rejection sensitivity ($F(2, 705) = 3.475$; $p = .032$), and the total social media rejection sensitivity ($F(2, 705) = 3.835$; $p = .022$). The post hoc result revealed that significant differences occurred between categories of students who use social media less than an

hour and those who use for like an hour $p = .011$, and did not produce the categories that differ regarding other dimensions where ANOVA showed significant differences.

Discussion of Findings

The demographic analysis showed that the majority of students were male and frequent social media users, with most reporting spending less than an hour daily on these platforms. This aligns with Gao,Assink, Cipriani and Lin (2021), who found that younger students, particularly in their late teens and early twenties, are highly active on social media and rely on peer validation, making them prone to social media rejection sensitivity. However, this study's findings suggest that even among students with relatively shorter time in engaging with social media, sensitivity to rejection remains significant, particularly among frequent users.

Furthermore, as regards sensitivity to specific social media interactions, the findings indicate that students were particularly sensitive to negative feedback, exclusion, and perceived online criticism, with females showing slightly higher sensitivity, although not statistically significant. Nigerian students' sensitivity to online exclusion may reflect a broader cultural context where social cohesion and group acceptance are prioritized as reflected in Minihan, Kwok and Schweizer (2023). Conversely, this result contrasts with findings by Liu, Kraines, Massing-Schaffer, and Alloy (2014), who noted lower sensitivity in individualistic cultures where personal achievement is emphasized over group validation. This difference could be attributed to cultural factors in Nigeria, where interpersonal relationships and social belonging hold strong significance.

Additionally, the study found no significant gender-based differences in emotional, cognitive, or behavioral rejection sensitivity dimensions. What this implies is that both female and male undergraduate students may have similar pattern of reaction to social media rejection. However, our findings contradict similar previous studies (Subair,Adebola & Yahya, 2019) that reported higher social media sensitivity among Nigerian female students. These studies have indicated that female students seem to be more sensitive to social media rejection. This, therefore, highlight the need for further investigation on social media rejection sensitivity based on gender.

Furthermore, frequency and duration of social media use significantly influenced cognitive and emotional sensitivity. Also, students who use social media daily and twice a week had higher mean

scores in social media rejection sensitivity aligning with the findings of Birkin et al. (2023), who demonstrated that students with heightened social media engagement are more prone to mental health challenges. Nwosu et al (2020) also reported that social media use may be detrimental to students' learning outcomes until there is a problematic use of the platforms. The present study's findings are consistent with Schaan et al. (2020), who also observed that prolonged engagement exacerbates rejection sensitivity, suggesting that frequent and extended social media use may increase vulnerability to rejection cues. Contrary to assumptions, students who spend less time in social media had higher social media rejection sensitivity than those who spend more time on social media. This could be that those who spend lesser time, do so because of the kind of feedback they get online.

Conclusion

This study examined how socio-demographic variables such as gender, frequency, and duration of social media use impact undergraduate students' sensitivity to social media rejection across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Findings revealed that while gender did not significantly influence rejection sensitivity, higher frequency and longer duration of social media use were associated with increased sensitivity, particularly in emotional and cognitive responses. This suggests that the more students engage with social media, the more likely they are to experience heightened rejection sensitivity. These results underscore the influence of social media engagement over traditional demographic variables in shaping students' emotional responses to online rejection, which may contribute to increased social anxiety and reduced academic focus.

Recommendations

1. Educational Awareness Programs: Universities should establish awareness programs to educate students on the effects of excessive social media use, especially regarding rejection sensitivity and mental health. Encouraging balanced media use may reduce the heightened sensitivity associated with prolonged online interactions.

2. Social Media Literacy and Resilience Training: Integrating resilience training and social media literacy into the university curriculum may help students manage negative feedback and rejection experiences. This could include coping strategies for online interactions, thus reducing rejection sensitivity's impact on emotional well-being.

3. Targeted Support for Frequent Social Media Users: Mental health services within universities should focus on supporting students with high social media engagement. Providing counseling services that address issues like anxiety, self-esteem, and sensitivity to rejection could alleviate the negative effects associated with extensive social media use.

4. Further Research: Future studies should explore additional socio-demographic factors, such as socioeconomic status and cultural influences, to offer a more nuanced understanding of how these variables interact with social media rejection sensitivity among diverse student populations.

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