Users and Uses of Social Media in The North-West Region of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT: This study provides an in-depth investigation into how young people in the university town of Bambili, located in the North West Region of Cameroon, use social media and the various motivations, challenges, and consequences associated with their engagement with digital platforms. In a rapidly evolving digital landscape, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, have become central to how youths communicate, access information, learn, socialize, and participate in entrepreneurial activities. The main purpose of this study was to examine not only the different purposes for which youths in Bambili use social media, but also the broader social, economic, and personal factors that shape their usage patterns and influence the outcomes of their online interactions both beneficial and detrimental. A qualitative research design was employed to capture the complex experiences, perceptions, and behaviours of young social media users. Twenty participants were purposively selected from diverse youth categories. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that elicited detailed accounts of participants' motivations, usage habits, challenges encountered, and the perceived positive and negative impacts of social media on their daily lives.

The study reveals that social media plays multiple essential roles in the lives of youths in Bambili: enhancing communication, facilitating academic collaboration, supporting access to timely information, providing entertainment, enabling self-expression, fostering business promotion, and creating new opportunities for income generation. However, the findings also expose the darker dimensions of digital engagement. These include exposure to online scams, emotional manipulation, pornography, cyberbullying, misinformation, addictive usage patterns, academic distraction, and financial exploitation. Usage patterns were further shaped by demographic factors such as age, gender, educational level, economic background, and the affordability and stability of internet access.

The study concludes that while social media is indispensable for youths in Bambili, it also presents significant risks when used without guidance, regulation, or adequate digital literacy skills. It recommends the development of structured digital literacy programs, online safety awareness campaigns, institutional social media policies, and mechanisms that encourage responsible and productive use of digital platforms. Overall, the study underscores the need for a balanced approach to ensure that youths maximize the benefits of social media while minimizing its harmful effects.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of contemporary youth culture across the world, transforming how young people communicate, interact, learn, and participate in socio-economic life. The proliferation of smartphones, coupled with increased internet penetration, has significantly altered daily routines and modes of social engagement, particularly among university youths. In Cameroon, this digital transformation is increasingly visible as technological adoption spreads from major urban centres into semi-urban academic environments such as Bambili. As the seat of the University of Bamenda and several professional institutions, Bambili hosts a dense population of adolescents and young adults who rely heavily on digital platforms for academic collaboration, social integration, economic survival, and self-expression. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, have thus become central tools for information access, communication, entertainment, skill development, and livelihood activities.

Within this context, the rise of digital culture among young people in Bambili cannot be separated from the broader socio-economic environment shaping their experiences. Many youths face academic pressures, limited employment opportunities, unstable socio-political conditions, and economic constraints that shape how they engage with social media. As documented in the thesis, the need for connection, belonging, and access to opportunities drives a large proportion of youths to adopt social media as a multifunctional tool for navigating daily challenges. Students use these platforms to join academic groups, share learning materials, access lecture updates, and coordinate group work. Young entrepreneurs rely heavily on social media marketing to promote goods and services, reach potential customers, and sustain micro-businesses. Job seekers and vocational trainees use the platforms to acquire information about training opportunities, job postings, and mentorship resources. Beyond instrumental uses, social media also plays a major role in entertainment, emotional support, identity formation, companionship, and establishing relationships in a context where physical socialization spaces are limited.

Despite its positive contributions, social media use among youths in Bambili presents significant concerns. The thesis highlights various risks and challenges encountered by young users, including addiction, distraction from academic work, misinformation, exposure to explicit content, cyberbullying, online scams, and emotional distress. Youths often navigate these challenges with limited digital literacy, as no formal structures exist to guide responsible online behaviour. Many institutions lack established policies regulating students' digital conduct, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and misuse. Furthermore, infrastructural challenges such as unstable internet connectivity, high data costs, and unreliable electricity further complicate the ways in which young people use digital platforms. These contextual limitations shape the patterns, intensity, and consequences of social media usage among youths, giving the phenomenon a distinct character in Bambili that deserves academic attention.

Existing literature acknowledges the dual nature of social media as both a resourceful and problematic tool in youth development. However, most studies conducted in Cameroon have focused on large cities such as Yaoundé, Douala, and Bamenda, with limited emphasis on emerging university towns like Bambili. As a fast-growing academic and residential hub with a unique mix of student populations, unemployed graduates, apprentices, and young entrepreneurs, Bambili presents a specific environment where social media functions as a lifeline for academic success, economic participation, and social integration. Yet the same environment exposes young people to a variety of digital risks. Understanding how these youths navigate social media in their daily lives is therefore crucial for informing policy, designing support systems, and improving digital education.

This article emerges from a broader academic inquiry aimed at filling this knowledge gap by analysing the uses and users of social media among youths in Bambili. It offers an in-depth exploration based on qualitative data generated from semi-structured interviews with purposively selected young participants. The introduction situates the study within global and local conversations on youth digital engagement and underscores the importance of examining social media from the viewpoint of young users living in a semi-urban university community. By investigating their motivations, challenges, and lived experiences, this study contributes to understanding how digital platforms shape youth development in a region where technological access continues to expand rapidly.

Background of the study and rationale

In recent years, the rapid growth of social media has significantly influenced the behaviour, relationships, and academic engagement of young people, particularly those in university environments. Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) are now part of the daily routine of many students, offering new ways to connect, express themselves, and access information (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). However, this increased presence of digital media in youth life has raised important questions about its impact.

A number of scholarly works have begun to explore these effects from different perspectives. For example, Nesi and Prinstein (2015) highlight that social media can play a useful role in helping young people explore and express their identities, especially when they are able to present themselves authentically online. However, the same study notes that constant exposure to idealized images and peer comparisons on these platforms may lead to confusion and emotional discomfort in the process of identity formation.

Similarly, a broader examination of youth mental health in relation to online platforms is presented by Keles, et al (2020), who bring attention to the growing concern that excessive or unbalanced use of social media can contribute to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, particularly when social validation and appearance-based pressures dominate the online experience. Although not all outcomes are negative some students report finding emotional support and peer encouragement online—these findings still call for cautious and informed usage among young people.

In a related discussion, Boer et al. (2021) outline how factors such as low self-esteem, social isolation, and limited offline engagement may lead to problematic or addictive patterns of social media use. This can have implications for students' well-being and productivity, especially when digital interactions begin to replace real-life relationships or interfere with daily responsibilities.

In terms of academic outcomes, some studies have explored how social media usage interacts with school-related experiences. For instance, O'Reilly et al. (2018) suggest that moderate use of social media may help students feel more connected to their learning environments, particularly when platforms are used for collaboration or group learning. However, the same study also finds that excessive use can result in declining academic performance and weakened classroom engagement. A comparable concern is raised

by Alwagait, et al (2015), who report that while social media can be a tool for exchanging academic content, its frequent misuse often leads to distraction, procrastination, and reduced focus on coursework.

In Cameroon and across Africa, social media has become more than just a space for individual expression it now plays a central role in public discourse, regulation, and even conflict, a reality that deeply affects youth in university settings like Bambili. A recent article titled "Social Media Regulation: African Partners To Uphold Cardinal Values" discusses how African governments and regional partners are striving to regulate online content in order to preserve cultural and moral standards. Such efforts influence how young people in universities view and use these platforms, potentially encouraging more cautious or value-driven behaviour. In a related vein, "NCC to Hold International Forum on Social Media Regulation" outlines the National Communication Council's plans to hold global discussions involving policymakers, tech companies, and civil society to shape social media laws. This demonstrates that students in Bambili are not only digital natives but also operate in a shifting legal and ethical landscape that shapes what content is acceptable and what is not. Meanwhile, the article "Social Media as the new 'public sphere' in the Cameroon Anglophone Conflict" illustrates how platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become key venues for citizens especially young people to discuss and mobilize around socio-political issues, particularly during the Anglophone crisis. This transformation of social media into an active public sphere shows that university students in Bambili may use these platforms for civic engagement, identity politics, and collective expression. Finally, an insight from "Let Social Media Serve as a Tip-off", NCC Boss in Bamenda" shows that authorities are encouraging social media users especially citizen-journalists to act responsibly by flagging harmful content and supporting fact-based communication. This call to ethical self-regulation may shape how Bambili students participate online, balancing between activism and responsible behaviour. Together, these articles underscore that social media use by youths in Bambili is influenced not only by personal needs for connection and identity but also by broader societal forces legal regulation, moral expectations, political mobilization, and civic responsibility. Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasping how university students engage with social media, what they use it for, and how they perceive its role in their educational and social lives. (Cameroon Tribune, *"Social Media Regulation: African Partners to Uphold Cardinal Values,"* 2023)

Altogether, these scholarly contributions offer a broader understanding of the complex relationship between social media and the lives of young people. They suggest that social media use among youths is shaped by a mixture of personal intention, social influence, and platform design, leading to both beneficial and harmful outcomes. In the context of the university milieu in Bambili, where students face a unique mix of academic pressure, digital exposure, and socio-cultural influences, it becomes crucial to investigate how social media is being used, for what purposes, and with what effects. By situating this study within the framework of these earlier investigations, the research aims to shed light on the lived experiences of students in Bambili and contribute to a more grounded and localized understanding of how social media influences youth behaviour, development, and academic life in a modern African university setting.

Rationale

The decision to focus this study on the topic "Users and Uses of Social Media in the University Milieu" is informed by the growing relevance of social media in the everyday lives of young people, especially university students (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In the 21st century, social media has become an inseparable part of how young people communicate, learn, express themselves, and connect with the world.

One of the major reasons this topic was chosen is because of the high penetration and widespread usage of social media platforms among university students and youths in general. These platforms are used not only for social interaction but also for academic discussions, political engagement, business promotion, and entertainment (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). However, despite the popularity of social media, there is still a gap in detailed local-level research in Cameroon that focuses on how and why youths in a university setting use these platforms.

Furthermore, the topic is relevant because it captures both the opportunities and challenges that come with social media use among young people. On the one hand, social media serves as a powerful tool for connection, creativity, and access to information. On the other hand, it is associated with risks such as cyberbullying, misinformation, academic distraction, addiction, and exposure to inappropriate content (Twenge, 2019). University youths are particularly vulnerable because they are in a transitional phase of life where they are building identities, exploring values, and making important life decisions.

The researcher's personal interest and observation of social media's impact also play a role in the choice of topic. As someone who interacts regularly with university students, the researcher has noticed extensive use of platforms for multiple purposes, ranging from learning and networking to entertainment and peer validation—echoing global observations about youth digital culture (Boyd, 2014).

Moreover, the topic aligns with current global and national concerns about digital behaviour, media consumption, and the social transformation of young populations. As digital technology continues to advance, it is crucial to understand how social media influences values, interactions, learning habits, and aspirations (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

Problematic

The rapid integration of social media into the daily lives of young people in Bambili presents a complex set of opportunities and challenges that have not been adequately examined within the academic landscape of Cameroon. Although social media has become central to youth communication, learning, and economic participation, its influence is neither uniform nor entirely beneficial. The situation in Bambili is particularly unique because it is a semi-urban university town characterized by a high concentration of students, job seekers, vocational trainees, and young entrepreneurs, all of whom rely heavily on digital platforms for different purposes. As documented in the thesis, these varied youth groups experience social media in ways that are shaped not only by personal motivations but also by structural factors such as limited economic resources, inconsistent internet connectivity and exposure to socio-political instability within the region. Understanding how these contextual realities shape social media behaviour is therefore crucial to identifying the specific digital needs and challenges of youths in Bambili.

One of the fundamental problems lies in the dual nature of social media: while it offers numerous benefits that support youth development, it simultaneously exposes young people to a range of risks that can undermine their academic, psychological, and social well-being. On the positive side, youths in Bambili use social media to communicate with peers, collaborate on school assignments, access educational materials, promote small businesses, engage in creative expression, and build social support networks. These functions make social media an indispensable tool. However, the same platforms that provide these benefits also expose youths to negative experiences such as cyberbullying, misinformation, online scams, sexual solicitation, academic distraction, emotional distress, and digital addiction. The findings show that many youths lack the digital literacy skills required to navigate these challenges effectively, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation.

Another dimension of the problem arises from the fact that, despite the widespread use of social media among youths in Bambili, no institutional structures exist to guide responsible or safe digital engagement. Unlike many developed countries where educational institutions provide digital literacy programs, online safety guidelines, and controlled use of digital platforms, the University of Bamenda and surrounding institutions offer minimal support in this regard. Youths therefore rely on self-taught practices, peer influence, and trial-and-error strategies to manage their online interactions. This lack of digital education increases the likelihood of risky behaviour, including oversharing personal information, engaging with suspicious accounts, falling into fraudulent schemes, or accessing harmful content. The absence of institutional involvement also means that issues such as cyberbullying, harassment, and academic misuse of social media remain unaddressed, leaving students without recourse or protection.

Socio-economic conditions further complicate social media usage patterns. Many young people in Bambili face financial constraints that limit their ability to purchase data bundles consistently, forcing them to rely on cheaper but less secure internet connections. They often turn to platforms that consume less data, such as WhatsApp or Facebook Lite, which shapes the type of content they access and the intensity of their online engagement. High unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities also push many youths to use social media as a means of survival, leading to increased dependence on platforms for income generation. While this entrepreneurial use of social media helps them sustain small businesses, it also exposes them to competitive pressures, unrealistic expectations, and vulnerability to online exploitation.

The problematic addressed in this study revolves around understanding how youths in Bambili navigate the benefits and dangers of social media within a context marked by institutional gaps, and socio-cultural complexities. While social media offers valuable opportunities for communication, learning, entrepreneurship, and social participation, it also presents significant risks that are often overlooked or unmanaged. The absence of structured guidance or digital education heightens these risks, making it essential to investigate how young people use social media, why they use it the way they do, and what consequences arise from their daily interactions online. This study therefore seeks to bridge the knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive, context-specific understanding of social media usage among youths in Bambili, ultimately informing interventions that can enhance positive outcomes while mitigating negative impacts. What is the main purposes for using social media among youths?

Methods Design and Theories

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the uses and users of social media among youths in Bambili. The choice of a qualitative approach was informed by the need to gain a deep, nuanced, and context-specific understanding of young people's experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding social media. Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize numerical patterns, qualitative research focuses on lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations, making it particularly suitable for a phenomenon as dynamic and socially embedded as digital behaviour. Social media practices are shaped by personal aspirations, emotional experiences, and interactions within both online and offline communities. Therefore, a qualitative design allowed the researcher to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of these experiences.

A phenomenological orientation guided the exploration of how participants make sense of their everyday engagement with social media. This interpretive stance focuses on understanding participants' subjective realities and how they perceive the impact of digital platforms on their academic, social, and economic lives. The study sought to uncover the essence of their digital experiences, paying attention to personal narratives, motivations, challenges, and feelings. By listening directly to the voices of youths, the research aimed to construct a grounded account of how social media functions in their daily routines, relationships, and aspirations.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the research problem. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies because it enables the researcher to select individuals based on their relevance, knowledge, and ability to articulate their experiences. In this study, the target population consisted of youths living and studying in Bambili, a rapidly expanding university town with a diverse youth demographic. Twenty participants were purposively chosen ensuring diversity in experiences, allowing the study to capture variations in social media usage. The sample size of twenty participants was adequate for a qualitative study of this nature, especially one guided by thematic analysis. Qualitative research values depth over breadth, and the selection of twenty participants provided sufficient data saturation, as recurring themes began to emerge during the interview process.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which offered flexibility while also ensuring focus on the core research questions. The interview guide included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to narrate their experiences, motivations, and challenges related to social media use. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they enable participants to express themselves freely while allowing the researcher to probe deeper into significant issues as they arose. This method was especially useful in exploring sensitive topics such as cyberbullying, online scams, and emotional distress, as participants felt more comfortable sharing in a conversational setting. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by participants for convenience and privacy. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to interpret the data. This method involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The six-step framework guided the process: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim and repeatedly read through the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Coding was done manually, allowing the researcher to remain closely connected to the emerging patterns and interpretive processes. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because it offers flexibility and is well suited to exploring subjective experiences. It enabled the researcher to organise the data into meaningful categories that reflected the realities of young social media users in Bambili. Major themes identified during analysis included academic uses, communication patterns, entertainment and leisure, entrepreneurial activities, psychological impacts, socio-economic influences, and challenges such as cyberbullying and misinformation. These themes formed the structure for the presentation of findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become an unavoidable component of youth life in the 21st century, with a growing body of research examining its role in communication, identity formation, education, and social interaction. Across the world, scholars agree that digital platforms have transformed traditional patterns of socialisation by offering new spaces for interaction, collaboration, and information exchange. boyd (2014) emphasises that social media provides youths with networked publics online spaces where they can gather, share ideas, and negotiate their identities. These networked environments allow young people to extend their social circles, maintain relationships, and engage with diverse communities beyond their immediate physical settings. The rise of user-generated content platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has further reshaped how youths construct and present their identities, as these platforms encourage visual expression, creativity, and constant interaction.

In the domain of communication, scholars such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that social media has revolutionised how individuals share information by enabling instantaneous and multidirectional communication. For young people, this shift offers greater autonomy in choosing when, how, and with whom they communicate. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram have made communication affordable and accessible, reducing the barriers associated with traditional telecommunication systems. This ease of communication is particularly significant in resource-constrained environments like Cameroon, where youths often rely on free or low-cost platforms to maintain academic and social networks. As noted in your thesis, students in Bambili join academic WhatsApp and Facebook groups to access lecture updates, share study materials, and collaborate on assignments, demonstrating how social media strengthens academic support systems.

Several theoretical frameworks help explain youth motivations for using social media. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), posits that individuals actively choose media sources based on the needs they seek to satisfy. In the context of social media, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) identify key gratifications such as entertainment, information-seeking, social interaction, passing time, and self-expression. Numerous studies confirm that youths use social media to gratify similar needs. The thesis findings align with this theoretical perspective, showing that young people in Bambili turn to platforms like TikTok and Instagram for entertainment, YouTube for skill acquisition, and WhatsApp for academic cooperation. UGT is therefore instrumental in interpreting the diversity of social media functions among youths.

Another relevant theoretical lens is the Social Comparison Theory proposed by Festinger (1954), which suggests that individuals evaluate themselves based on comparisons with others. With the growth of visual-based platforms, youths are increasingly exposed to curated images, achievements, and lifestyles of their peers. Scholars such as Valkenburg and Peter (2011) note that constant exposure to idealised content can create psychological pressures, leading to reduced self-esteem, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction. These concerns are echoed in your thesis, where participants reported feeling inadequate or pressured to appear successful due to

the influence of social media personalities and peers. Social comparison plays a significant role in shaping how young people interpret their experiences and construct their online identities.

In the African context, research shows that social media has become an important tool for youth participation, civic engagement, and economic empowerment. Studies conducted in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa highlight the growing influence of digital platforms in mobilising youth for social causes, promoting small businesses, and facilitating innovation (Okafor, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2019). Similarly, in Cameroon, scholars such as Ndangam (2018) and Nyamnjoh (2013) emphasise the role of social media in political expression, public communication, and the emergence of new forms of youth agency. Social media has thus provided youths with opportunities to contribute to public debates, advocate for change, and express their views freely, particularly in regions affected by socio-political instability.

Despite these benefits, the literature also documents significant challenges associated with youth engagement in social media. Researchers warn that excessive use can lead to behavioural addiction, decreased productivity, and academic decline (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Misinformation is another growing concern, as many youths rely on unverified sources, leading to distorted perceptions, panic, or poor decision-making. Cyberbullying remains a prevalent issue, with numerous studies demonstrating its impact on mental health, emotional well-being, and social relationships. Your thesis findings corroborate these concerns, revealing instances of online harassment, blackmail, explicit content exposure, and psychological distress among youths in Bambili. These negative experiences highlight the vulnerabilities that accompany increased digital engagement, especially in contexts where digital literacy remains low.

Entrepreneurship is another emerging area of interest within the literature. Scholars point out that social media has opened new economic opportunities for youths, particularly those facing unemployment or financial constraints (Chigona & Lwoga, 2021). Platforms like Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp Status, and TikTok offer low-barrier avenues for advertising products, building customer networks, and generating income. In your thesis, several young entrepreneurs and job seekers affirmed that social media allowed them to promote services, attract clients, and sustain small-scale businesses despite limited capital. This entrepreneurial use demonstrates social media's potential to support youth empowerment and economic resilience in contexts marked by job scarcity.

Furthermore, the literature highlights the importance of socio-demographic factors in shaping social media usage. Studies show that age, gender, education, socio-economic status, and geographical location influence the frequency, purpose, and risks associated with social media engagement. For instance, younger youths tend to use platforms for entertainment and social interaction, while older youths may prioritize professional networking or business promotion. These variations are also evident in your thesis, where usage patterns differed between students, job seekers, vocational trainees, and entrepreneurs. Understanding these differences is essential for designing targeted digital literacy programs that meet the specific needs of diverse youth groups.

In summary, the literature indicates that social media is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that significantly impacts youth communication, identity, education, and socio-economic participation. While it offers numerous benefits, it also presents substantial risks that require careful management. The existing scholarship highlights global and regional trends, yet gaps remain regarding semi-urban university settings like Bambili. This study therefore contributes to filling this gap by examining how youths in Bambili use social media within their social, economic, and cultural realities.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal a complex, multifaceted landscape of social media usage among youths in Bambili. Drawing from the narratives of the twenty participants, the results indicate that social media has become deeply integrated into the everyday activities of young people. It shapes their academic routines, social interactions, emotional well-being, entrepreneurial engagements, and access to information. The findings are presented thematically to reflect the patterns that emerged from the participants' experiences. Across all participants, social media served as both a vital resource and a source of vulnerability. The findings therefore present a dualistic reality in which the benefits of social media coexist with significant challenges.

Social media plays a major role in the daily lives of youths in Bambili, especially in academic, social, entertainment, and entrepreneurial activities. Many students depend on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube to access lecture notes, group discussions, announcements, and supplementary tutorials. These platforms help them stay updated despite limited institutional communication, although the overload of messages sometimes disrupts concentration and causes important information to get lost. Social media is also vital for communication and maintaining relationships. Youths use WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger to stay connected with friends, family, and wider social networks, and some even form new friendships online. However, online interaction sometimes leads to misunderstandings or creates tension in offline relationships. Entertainment is another major use. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram provide relaxation, humor, and leisure after long days. Yet, excessive scrolling leads to procrastination, reduced productivity, and sometimes lower academic performance. Entrepreneurial use emerged strongly, with youths using Facebook, WhatsApp Status, and TikTok to market products, attract customers, and build small businesses at low cost. Despite benefits, they face issues like low internet stability, customer distrust, and limited reach. Finally, youths are exposed to online risks such as scams, fake profiles, cyberbullying, sexually inappropriate messages, and misinformation. These negative experiences highlight the need for better digital safety education and awareness among young people.

The main purposes for using social media among youths

People use social media for a many reasons, reflecting its massive integration into modern life. Primarily, it serves as a tool for connecting with friends and family, bridging geographical gaps and strengthening relationships by facilitating easy communication across distances. Beyond personal connections, social media provides avenues for professional networking, enabling individuals to seek job opportunities, connect with peers, and conduct research. A significant portion of users turn to these platforms for entertainment and to pass time, consuming a plethora of engaging content such as videos, memes, and trending topics. Social media has also evolved into a vital source for information and news consumption, allowing users to stay updated on current events, global issues, and diverse perspectives. Moreover, it offers a space for self-expression, where individuals can express their identities, share their thoughts, and showcase their creativity through various forms of content. The platforms also foster community building, allowing users to connect with like-minded individuals who share similar interests, hobbies, or even political views. In this study, a majority of the youths used social media for education, promote businesses, communication and entertainment. Some responses are mentioned below:

"Primarily for entrepreneurship, I sell clothes through my Instagram and WhatsApp status, and I often communicate with customers via those platforms. Also, I use it for academic research, updates on current affairs, and occasionally just to relax by watching videos. Mainly for content creation and promotion, learning through educational videos, and engaging with online communities interested in media, youth issues, and creative writing. Primarily for learning especially by following pages that share medical tips. I also use it to relax with videos or check up on my classmates and relatives. I use it for advocacy work, sharing educational content, discovering events or conferences, and spreading awareness about youth development issues. Mostly for entertainment, chatting with my peers, and also to follow motivational content."

The main reasons why other youths use social media

Among youths, social media serves a multitude of purposes that extend beyond simple entertainment to harmful practices. A primary reason for its widespread use is to maintain and strengthen connections with peers, both on and off campus, fostering a sense of community and belonging crucial for navigating the university environment. Youths use platforms to coordinate study groups, share notes, and collaborate on projects, effectively using social media as an extension of the classroom. Staying informed about campus events, deadlines, and university news is another key driver, with official university accounts and student-run pages acting as central hubs for information dissemination. Social media also provides a vital outlet for self-expression and identity exploration, allowing students to showcase their talents, share their perspectives, and connect with like-minded individuals. Many students utilize platforms for professional networking, building connections with alumni, exploring internship opportunities, and establishing their online presence for future career prospects. Beyond academic and professional pursuits, social media offers a space for stress relief and entertainment, providing a break from the pressures of university life through engaging content and social interaction. Moreover, social media enables students to participate in social activism and advocacy, raising awareness about important issues, organizing campaigns, and mobilizing support for causes they believe in. While social media offers several benefits, including improved academic collaboration, professional networking, and civic engagement, concerns have also emerged regarding its negative impacts on youths' academic performance, mental health, and social behaviours. In this study, it was found out that a majority of youths used social media for harmful practices as mentioned by some participants below:

"Some people use it to promote their businesses; others to make new friends, and unfortunately, some misuse it for dishonest things like scamming or spreading false information. Some use it for online sales, others for dating, gossip, or even negative stuff like bullying or fraud. From what I observe, people use it for online dating, posting funny videos, promoting small businesses, or sadly, for things like blackmail and scamming.

Others use it to run their small businesses, do school work, some for hookup things, and even fraud or blackmail. Many use it for fun, for their hustle, or for questionable things like bullying or cybercrime."

Social media has significantly transformed how people interact, communicate, and conduct business. While its benefits are numerous, the platforms also present opportunities for negative behaviours, particularly among youths. One alarming misuse is the increase in online scams and fraudulent activities, with young people both as victims and perpetrators.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become fertile grounds for scammers. Youths, due to their frequent and unsupervised usage, are especially vulnerable. Scams can range from phishing messages and fake investment opportunities to online romance frauds and fraudulent giveaways (Button, Cross, and Warnes, 2022). A common scam involves impersonation: fraudsters create fake profiles to ask money or personal data. In many cases, youths are lured into "get-rich-quick" schemes, promising large returns from small investments especially in cryptocurrency or forex trading. These scams exploit the economic desperation and material aspirations of young people. Interestingly, some youths are not just victims but also engage in scams themselves. The anonymity and reach of social media reduce the fear of getting caught, encouraging fraudulent behaviour. Some are recruited into cybercrime syndicates, while others run individual scams to gain financial advantage or social status (Chiluwa and Onyema, 2018).

Social media also glamorizes fraudulent lifestyles. "Yahoo boys" or internet fraudsters often showcase their wealth and lifestyle, which can serve as motivation for others to join such activities (Tade and Aliyu, 2022). This normalization of digital crime is a

major concern. Victims of scams often suffer financial loss, psychological trauma, and embarrassment. Young perpetrators risk legal consequences, damaged reputations, and long-term psychological effects. The trust deficits created also affects digital communication generally people become more skeptical and less open online (Whitty, 2018).

The awareness of the harmful effects of social media usage among youths

It is difficult to definitively say whether people in Bambili are fully aware of the harmful effects of social media, but several factors suggest a mixed awareness among the youth. Studies in Cameroon indicate that social media has both positive and negative impacts on students, enhancing communication and access to information while also leading to distractions and mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Research conducted at the Higher Teacher Training College in Bambili highlights that Facebook usage can intensify cultural comparisons, sometimes resulting in feelings of depression among students who engage in negative self-comparisons. While many young people are aware of cybercrimes such as phishing and cyberbullying, awareness of issues like fake news and online scams tends to be lower. Additionally, social media's potential as a communication channel in the conflict-affected regions of South West and North West Cameroon has not been fully realized, suggesting that while some awareness exists, it may not be comprehensive or fully impactful. A majority of the youths in Bambili acknowledged that they were aware of the harmful effects of social media. Some responses are presented below:

"Yeah, I believe most people are aware. Yes, most of them do know, but some don't take it seriously. Yeah, many people talk about the dangers but not everyone listens. I believe so, because they discuss it a lot in school and among friends. Yes. But knowing and taking it serious are two different things. Not fully. Many are aware something isn't right when it happens, but they don't understand the full consequences of things like cyberbullying or sharing private information. To some extent, yes. But I think most people downplay the long-term consequences. They know it's bad, but they don't take active steps to protect themselves. Not really. Some are aware but don't fully understand the seriousness of it. Others joke about things like cyberbullying without knowing how harmful it is. Some are, but many people still act carelessly. They don't realize that things like sharing someone's private information can have real consequences.

The best communication methods that can be used to sensitize youths in about harmful effects of social media usage

Effective communication methods for sensitizing youths in a university area like Bambili about the harmful effects of social media require a wide approach. Given the high social media usage among students, using digital platforms themselves is crucial; this includes creating targeted social media campaigns with compelling visuals and concise messaging to raise awareness about cyber bullying, privacy risks, and the impact on mental health. Integrating digital literacy and critical thinking skills into the university curriculum can equip students with the ability to evaluate online content and make informed decisions. Additionally, peer-to-peer education programs, where students educate their peers about responsible social media usage, can be highly effective. Organizing workshops, seminars, and town hall meetings that feature experts in mental health, cybersecurity, and digital media can provide valuable insights and foster open discussions. Collaborating with local media, including radio and television, to disseminate information and share personal stories can also broaden the reach of awareness campaigns. The findings from this study revealed that posting videos of people who have had past experiences is a significant method of sensitizing the youths. As presented below:

"Through videos in local languages, community drama, or inviting survivors of scams to share their experiences. well in this case I think by regularly posting educative content about the dangers of social media and out to prevent and avoid them. Use clubs and school groups to spread the message, also videos on platforms people actually use. Live talks and even memes that pass the message. Maybe invite influencers to educate online or face to face events too. I believe short-form videos, info graphics, and interactive webinars work best. Most students are visual learners, so engagement matters a lot. Visual campaigns things like animated videos, memes with strong messages, and real-life testimonies shared online work better than posters. Short documentary-style videos or real-life stories from victims would work. Also, regular posts from verified pages using simple language. Town hall meetings, engaging radio programs, and short social media clips from respected voices in the community can really get through to people. Story-based skits, visual animations, and testimonies shared on social media itself. These methods capture attention and make people reflect"

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex and interconnected web of motivations, experiences, and challenges that shape how youths in Bambili use social media. The discussion therefore situates the results within broader theoretical and empirical debates, highlighting how the experiences of youths in Bambili reflect global trends while also being shaped by unique contextual realities. The Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a useful lens through which to interpret the ways youths actively choose platforms that meet their academic, social, emotional, and economic needs. Participants consistently demonstrated that their use of platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram was intentional and goal-oriented. Whether they were seeking academic assistance, entertainment, social connection, income-generating opportunities, or emotional support, their choices reflected a pattern of media consumption motivated by specific personal gratifications. This aligns with Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) argument that social media users engage with platforms primarily to satisfy internal needs related to information, interaction, and

entertainment. At the same time, the findings extend the Uses and Gratifications framework by showing how structural limitations such as poor infrastructure, financial constraints, and socio-political instability shape the choices available to youths in Bambili. Unlike youth in more technologically advanced environments, participants in this study were often constrained by unstable internet connectivity, limited access to digital devices, and high data costs. These limitations sometimes restricted them to less data-intensive applications or forced them to rely heavily on WhatsApp, which is more affordable and widely accessible. This indicates that although youths choose platforms based on personal gratifications, their choices are also conditioned by the economic and infrastructural realities of their environment. This observation enriches theoretical discussions by showing that media gratification is not solely a matter of individual preference but also influenced by external constraints.

The Social Comparison Theory also provides important insights into the emotional and psychological effects of social media use observed in this study. Participants' experiences of feeling inadequate, envious, or pressured by the curated lifestyles of others reflect the mechanisms of upward social comparison described by Festinger (1954). The constant exposure to idealized images, achievements, and appearances on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok makes youths more susceptible to comparing themselves with peers or influencers, often resulting in negative emotions. This aligns with global literature indicating that heavy social media use can contribute to reduced self-esteem, increased anxiety, and emotional distress among adolescents and young adults. What is unique in the context of Bambili, however, is the intersection of digital comparison with socio-economic hardship. Many participants expressed that seeing peers display material success or glamour online intensified feelings of inadequacy, particularly because their own economic environment provided limited opportunities for upward mobility. This suggests that digital comparison may have deeper psychological consequences in communities facing financial instability.

Furthermore, the results reveal that social media plays a central role in the academic lives of youths in Bambili, and this both confirms and expands existing research. While scholars acknowledge that social media enhances collaboration and information sharing in academic contexts, the findings here show that in Bambili, where institutional communication systems are weak, social media fills a critical gap. WhatsApp groups, for example, often serve as the primary source of academic updates, lecture notes, and peer support. This demonstrates that social media is not merely supplementary but essential for academic functioning in this context. However, the study also reveals a paradox: the same platforms that facilitate academic success can simultaneously undermine it. Participants frequently explained that entertainment-driven usage, especially on TikTok and Facebook, led to distraction and procrastination. This dual effect supporting and disrupting academic success highlights the need for more structured digital literacy programs that help youths balance academic productivity with recreational use.

The study also provides important insights into the role of social media in youth entrepreneurship. Many participants described using social media to promote small businesses, advertise products, attract customers, and learn business skills. This finding aligns with the growing body of literature showing that digital platforms are opening new economic opportunities for young people, especially in regions with high unemployment. However, the entrepreneurial activities observed in Bambili are shaped by unique local conditions, including limited access to formal employment, unstable infrastructure, and the absence of physical marketplaces for some youths. Social media therefore becomes not only a tool for advertising but a lifeline for survival. The entrepreneurial creativity demonstrated by participants, particularly through Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp Status, and TikTok, underscores the potential of digital platforms to empower young people economically when traditional avenues are inaccessible. Yet, these entrepreneurial activities are not without challenges. Participants frequently described difficulties related to customer trust, online fraud, and inconsistent access to internet services. Fake pages, scammers posing as clients, and dishonest buyers were recurrent concerns, demonstrating that entrepreneurial use of social media in Bambili is fraught with risks. These challenges highlight the need for enhanced digital safety awareness among youths and the creation of local structures to support digital entrepreneurship responsibly. One of the most striking findings of this study is the extent to which youths in Bambili are exposed to online risks, including cyberbullying, sexual solicitation, financial scams, misinformation, and emotional manipulation. These experiences reflect global trends in online harm but take on a distinct character due to the socio-cultural environment of Bambili. For example, misinformation related to socio-political issues in the North West Region spreads rapidly on social media, creating fear, confusion, and tension among young people. Participants also described being targeted by anonymous individuals or manipulated into unsafe interactions due to limited digital literacy. These findings underscore the urgent need for institutional frameworks that promote online safety and equip youths with skills to navigate digital risks.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal that social media usage among youths in Bambili is both empowering and challenging. Social media provides academic support, emotional connection, entertainment, and economic opportunities, yet it also exposes youths to various vulnerabilities. These findings suggest that social media is neither inherently good nor bad; rather, its effects depend on the user's intentions, skills, environment, and level of self-regulation. The dual nature of social media highlighted in this study reinforces the need for balanced, context-sensitive approaches to digital education and policy development. This discussion therefore demonstrates that while youths in Bambili use social media in ways consistent with global youth trends, the realities of their socio-economic and cultural environment shape unique patterns of usage and exposure. The study contributes new knowledge by documenting these patterns and highlighting the need for targeted interventions that address the specific needs and risks of young social media users in Bambili.

CONCLUSION

To end up, the findings of this study demonstrate that social media has become an indispensable component of youth life in Bambili, shaping academic engagement, communication patterns, economic participation, emotional well-being, and social behaviour. The results reveal that youths use social media purposefully and creatively, drawing on various platforms to meet their needs for information, connection, entertainment, and income generation. Within a rapidly evolving digital environment, young people in Bambili have integrated social media into their daily routines in ways that reflect both global trends and local realities. Academic activities are enhanced through collaborative WhatsApp and Facebook groups, which compensate for institutional communication gaps. Youths rely on these platforms to share lecture notes, coordinate assignments, and receive academic updates. Similarly, communication with peers, family, and wider social networks is facilitated through affordable messaging applications, enabling constant interpersonal connection in a context marked by mobility and socio-economic constraints. The study also concludes that social media plays a critical role in supporting youth entrepreneurship and economic survival. Participants demonstrated remarkable innovation in using platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp Status, and TikTok to promote businesses, attract customers, and navigate the financial challenges associated with unemployment and limited job opportunities. This emerging digital entrepreneurship highlights the transformative potential of social media for youth empowerment, particularly in regions lacking formal economic structures. However, the findings also expose significant vulnerabilities associated with online engagement. Many youths face digital risks such as fraud, cyberbullying, misinformation, sexual solicitation, and addictive use patterns. The consequences of these risks anxiety, self-esteem issues, stress, and academic distraction further reinforce the need for protective mechanisms and digital literacy interventions.

A major conclusion that emerges is the dual nature of social media: it simultaneously empowers and endangers young people. While it opens pathways for learning, economic advancement, and social connection, it also exposes youths to harms that can undermine their well-being and academic success. This duality underscores the importance of contextualizing social media use within the socio-economic and cultural realities of Bambili. Youths' choices and behaviours on digital platforms are influenced not only by personal motivations but also by infrastructural limitations such as high data costs and unstable internet. These factors shape how social media is adopted, experienced, and interpreted by young people, making it essential for stakeholders to understand the contextual challenges that amplify digital risks in such environments.

The study therefore concludes that while social media is a powerful tool for youth development, its positive impact can only be maximized when young people possess the skills, knowledge, and support systems necessary to use it responsibly. There is a pressing need for digital literacy programs that teach youths how to authenticate information, protect personal data, manage time online, and respond to online threats. Educational institutions, youth organisations, and community stakeholders must collaborate to develop guidelines and interventions that address the unique digital vulnerabilities faced by youths in Bambili. Policies that promote safe, ethical, and productive digital engagement are essential for harnessing the full potential of social media while reducing its associated harms. In sum, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how youths in B - ambili engage with social media and highlights the importance of balanced and informed digital practices. By acknowledging both the opportunities and challenges presented by social media, this research contributes valuable insights toward developing strategies that support youth empowerment, protect their well-being, and promote responsible digital citizenship in the university milieu of Bambili. The findings underscore the need for ongoing research, policy development, and community-based initiatives that respond to the evolving digital landscape and the realities of youth life in Cameroon.

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