



Qualitative Analysis of Social Media Utilization in Relation to Time, Gender, Location and Age Among Christian Religious Studies Students in Enugu State, Nigeria

Efido B. S. Okechukwu

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Email: blessed.efido@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This study investigated social media utilization and selected learner variables among Senior Secondary School II Christian Religious Studies (CRS) students in Enugu State, Nigeria. Five research questions guided the study. The population consisted of 7,822 SS II CRS students from public secondary schools in Enugu State. A sample of 100 students was selected from co-educational schools in both urban and rural areas. The sample comprised 50 students from urban schools and 50 from rural schools, drawn from 20 selected secondary schools, with five participants from each school. Data were collected using a researcher-developed Focus Group Discussion guide titled *Students on Social Media Focus Group Discussion (SOSM-FGD)*. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that students commonly use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Messenger, and YouTube, with high levels of usage across respondents. However, platforms such as Myspace, MyChat, and 2Go were rarely used, while LinkedIn, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were minimally utilized. The study also found that students spend between 5–14 hours daily on social media. Female students were found to use social media more than male students, while urban students exhibited higher usage than their rural counterparts. Additionally, most students were introduced to social media at an early stage in secondary education. Based on the findings, it was recommended for the enhancement of academic-oriented social media use, regulation of daily social media usage, promotion of gender-inclusive digital awareness, bridging the urban–rural digital divide and strengthening early digital citizenship education

Keywords: social media, time, gender, location and age, Christian religious studies, secondary school students, Enugu State

Introduction

Christian Religious Studies (CRS) occupies an important place in the Nigerian school curriculum, being offered as a core subject at the junior secondary level and as an elective at the senior secondary level. The subject was introduced into the Nigerian education system through early European missionaries who used it as a means of evangelization and moral instruction. Following Nigeria's independence, control of schools was transferred from missionary bodies to the government, leading to several curricular reforms. During these reforms, the subject underwent changes in nomenclature from Bible Knowledge to Christian Religious Knowledge, and later to Christian Religious Studies. The 1983 national curriculum review further expanded the educational framework to include arts, sciences, and technology subjects, with CRS retained due to its perceived moral and educational value (Ilechukwu & Usulor, 2019). The subject has remained a significant component of the Nigerian school

curriculum due to its emphasis on moral instruction and character formation (Onovughe, 2008). CRS is widely recognized for its contribution to learners' moral, spiritual, and social development. According to Efido (2022), the subject assists learners in developing a holistic understanding of themselves, their environment, and their relationship with others and God. It also fosters moral values and positive behavioral development, thereby contributing to responsible citizenship (Gichanga et al., 2003). In line with national educational goals, CRS is designed to produce students who are intellectually competent, morally sound, and socially responsible (Akubue, 2012). In contemporary education, the objectives of CRS extend beyond traditional moral instruction to include responsiveness to modern technological realities.

The emergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), particularly social media, has significantly influenced teaching and

learning processes. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and others have become integral to students' daily lives, shaping communication, interaction, and information access. Hence, Efido (2023), noted that social media utilization is the brainchild of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The evolution has permeated every stratum of society thus, it has thrown students at all levels into the visual space. Students spend hours surfing the net, engaging themselves in chatting and socializing on different social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Mychat, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Google, Tumblr, 2Go, Research gate, Messenger and Instagram. The use of the social media is on a very high increase in contemporary society, especially among students. In recent years, the learning environment of has been significantly influenced by digital technologies, particularly social media platforms. It has transformed how students communicate, access information, and spend their time. The platforms are now deeply embedded in students' daily lives, affecting both academic and social behaviours. Importantly, social media utilization among students is not uniform. It is shaped by key learner variables such as time of exposure, gender, geographical location, and age of first access.

The variable of time is critical because students increasingly spend several hours daily on social media, which may influence their attention span, academic engagement, and study habits. Excessive screen time has been associated with reduced concentration on academic tasks and increased distraction from learning activities. The gender variable is also significant in understanding social media behaviour. Studies have suggested that differences may exist in how male and female students engage with digital platforms, with females often showing higher engagement in communication-oriented and social networking activities, while males may demonstrate more selective or content-specific usage patterns. Similarly, location (urban and rural) plays a crucial role in shaping access and usage patterns. Students in urban areas generally have better internet connectivity, access to smartphones, and digital literacy exposure compared to their rural counterparts. Thus, this disparities in access and usage between urban and rural students, as well as gender-based differences, have been observed in the literature. Although previous studies have examined the role of instructional media and ICT in education (Wamalwa & Wamalwa, 2014; Onsongo, 2002),

limited empirical attention has been given to how CRS students specifically utilize social media in relation to learner variables such as time of use, gender, and location. This creates a digital divide that influences the frequency and intensity of social media use among students. The age of first exposure is another important factor, as early introduction to social media during primary or junior secondary school years may lead to long-term habitual usage patterns. Early exposure often occurs through peer influence, family access to digital devices, and increasing technological penetration in society.

Despite the growing influence of these variables, there is limited empirical evidence on how they collectively shape social media utilization among CRS students, particularly using qualitative approaches that capture learners' lived experiences. Most existing studies have focused on general secondary school populations without isolating CRS students, who are expected to exhibit distinct moral and academic orientations due to the nature of their subject. Studies suggest that many students devote substantial time to social media activities, which may influence their academic engagement and learning outcomes. This gap is significant, considering the increasing integration of digital platforms into students' social and academic lives. It is against this background that this study investigates social media utilization in relation to time, gender, location, and age among CRS students in Enugu State, Nigeria, using a qualitative focus group approach to provide deeper insight into students' lived experiences and behavioural patterns.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized educational and moral value of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) in shaping learners' character and promoting responsible citizenship, the increasing influence of social media among secondary school students raises growing concern. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have become central to students' daily communication and interaction patterns. While these platforms may support learning and information sharing, there is increasing evidence that excessive use may affect students' academic engagement and focus.

Furthermore, differences in social media usage based on learner variables such as gender, location (urban and rural), and time spent online have been reported in literature, yet findings remain inconsistent.

In the context of CRS students in Enugu State, there is limited empirical evidence on how these variables influence social media utilization. It is therefore unclear how Senior Secondary School II CRS students use social media, and the extent to which their usage patterns differ based on selected learner variables. This lack of clear evidence creates a gap in understanding that may hinder effective educational planning and guidance. It is against this background that this study investigates social media utilization and selected learner variables among Senior Secondary School II CRS students in Enugu State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate social media utilization and selected learner variables (time, gender, and location) among Senior Secondary School II Christian Religious Studies students in Enugu State, Nigeria.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. identify the social media platforms commonly used by CRS students;
2. determine the amount of time CRS students spend on social media;
3. examine differences in social media utilization based on gender;
4. examine differences in social media utilization based on location (urban and rural);
5. explore the age at which students were first exposed to social media.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What social media platforms are commonly used by CRS students in Enugu State?
2. How much time do CRS students spend on social media daily?
3. What is the difference in social media utilization between male and female CRS students?
4. What is the difference in social media utilization between urban and rural CRS students?
5. At what stage were CRS students first exposed to social media?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design using focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore social media utilization among Senior Secondary

School II Christian Religious Studies (CRS) students in Enugu State, Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions through interactive group discussions.

The study was conducted in Enugu State, Nigeria. The state is located in southeastern Nigeria and shares boundaries with Benue State to the north, Kogi State to the west, Abia State to the south, and Ebonyi and Anambra States to the east. Enugu State comprises six education zones: Agbani, Agwu, Enugu, Nsukka, Obollo-Afor, and Udi, and seventeen local government areas.

The population of the study consisted of 7,822 Senior Secondary School II CRS students in public secondary schools in Enugu State. A sample of 100 students was selected from 20 co-educational secondary schools. From each selected school, five students were purposively selected, giving a total of 100 participants. The sample included students from both urban and rural schools to ensure variation in perspectives.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed Focus Group Discussion Guide titled *Students on Social Media Focus Group Discussion (SOSM-FGD)*. The guide consisted of structured and semi-structured questions designed in line with the research questions of the study, focusing on social media platforms used, time spent online, and differences based on gender, location, and age of exposure.

The instrument was face-validated by three experts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka: one from Arts Education, one from Measurement and Evaluation, and one from Religion and Cultural Studies. Their suggestions led to the refinement of the research questions and modification of the FGD guide to improve clarity and relevance.

The researcher conducted the focus group discussions personally. Responses were recorded using audio recordings and written notes to ensure accurate documentation of participants' views. Each session was guided by the discussion protocol, and participants were encouraged to freely express their opinions and interact with one another.

Data obtained from the focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring patterns and themes across the data set. These themes were used to interpret participants' responses in relation to the research questions, particularly on

patterns of social media use, time spent, and variations based on gender, location, and age of exposure.

Results

Theme 1: Social Media Platforms Commonly Used by CRS Students

The analysis revealed that students frequently use several social media platforms for communication, entertainment, and academic purposes. The most commonly mentioned platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Messenger. Participants consistently indicated that WhatsApp and Facebook were the most dominant platforms used for daily interaction and information sharing. Instagram and YouTube were also frequently used for entertainment and video-based content, while Twitter and Messenger were used for communication and updates. However, platforms such as MySpace, MyChat, and 2Go were rarely used, indicating low relevance among current secondary school students. Academic-oriented platforms such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate were minimally used. “Most of us use WhatsApp every day for chatting and group discussions, while Facebook and Instagram are more for updates and entertainment.” (FGD Participant).

Theme 2: Time Spent on Social Media

Findings showed that students spend a considerable amount of time on social media daily. Most participants reported spending between 5 to 10 hours, while others indicated usage of up to 11–14 hours per day. The discussions revealed that social media usage often extends beyond academic needs, especially during weekends and after school hours. “Sometimes I spend almost the whole evening on Instagram or WhatsApp, especially when I finish studying.” (FGD Participant). This indicates that social media forms a significant part of students’ daily routines.

Theme 3: Gender Differences in Social Media Utilization

The findings revealed differences in usage patterns based on gender. Female students were reported to use social media more frequently than male students. This was attributed to higher engagement in communication, entertainment, and social interaction among female participants. Male students, however, indicated more selective usage, often focusing on specific content or academic-related communication. “Girls in our school use social media more than boys,

especially Instagram and WhatsApp.” (FGD Participant).

Theme 4: Influence of Location (Urban and Rural Differences)

The study found that students in urban schools have greater access to social media and use it more frequently than those in rural areas. This difference was linked to better internet access, network availability, and device ownership in urban areas. Rural students reported challenges such as poor network connectivity and limited access to smartphones. “In town it is easier because network is strong, but in rural areas it is not always stable.” (FGD Participant)

Theme 5: Age of First Exposure to Social Media

Findings revealed that most students were introduced to social media during early secondary school years. Many participants indicated that they started using social media between ages 11 and 14. Early exposure was often influenced by peers, family members, and increasing digital access. “I started using WhatsApp when I was in JSS2 because my friends were already using it.” (FGD Participant).

Discussion

The social media platforms commonly used by CRS students

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of literature that highlights the widespread integration of social media into the daily lives of secondary school students. The dominance of platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram reflects global patterns in youth digital communication, where social networking applications serve as primary tools for interaction, information sharing, and entertainment (Boyd, 2014; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Recent studies further confirm that these platforms remain the most frequently used among adolescents in developing countries due to their affordability, accessibility, and multifunctional nature (Ojo, 2022; Irele & Arowolo, 2026). This suggests that CRS students in Enugu State are actively engaged in contemporary digital communication practices that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, aligning with global digital youth culture.

The prominence of WhatsApp, in particular, indicates a shift toward instant messaging platforms that facilitate both academic and social interaction. WhatsApp has increasingly become a preferred tool for peer learning, group discussions, and informal academic support among students (Adeniyi, 2022).

Similarly, the high usage of Facebook and Instagram demonstrates students' preference for visually driven and socially interactive platforms, which are often designed to maximize engagement rather than academic productivity. However, the limited use of academically oriented platforms such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate suggests that social media engagement among CRS students is largely non-academic in orientation. This aligns with findings that adolescents primarily use social media for socialization, identity formation, and entertainment rather than structured academic purposes (Junco, 2012; Tømte et al., 2015; Nnaji et al., 2020). This raises important implications for educators regarding the need to integrate guided digital literacy strategies that encourage meaningful academic engagement with online platforms.

The amount of time CRS students spend on social media

Furthermore, the study revealed that students spend a considerable amount of time on social media daily, with most participants reporting between five and ten hours of usage. This high level of engagement reflects the increasing centrality of social media in adolescents' daily routines and reinforces concerns about digital dependency among secondary school learners (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Irele & Arowolo, 2026). While such engagement may enhance connectivity, peer learning, and access to information, recent studies warn that excessive social media use is associated with reduced academic concentration, procrastination, sleep disruption, and weakened study discipline (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Aderele & Aliu, 2025). This suggests that without proper regulation, social media may shift from being a supportive learning tool to a potential academic distraction.

The differences in social media utilization based on gender

The findings on gender differences indicate a relatively balanced pattern of social media usage between male and female students, although female students were slightly more engaged. This is consistent with studies suggesting that females are more inclined toward social networking and communication-based online interaction due to relational and expressive communication tendencies (Mazman & Usluel, 2011). However, more recent research indicates that this gender gap is narrowing significantly as digital access becomes more universal and smartphones become equally available across gender groups (Irele &

Arowolo, 2026). The minimal difference observed in this study therefore suggests that gender may no longer be a strong determinant of social media usage among adolescents in contemporary digital environments.

The differences in social media utilization based on location (urban and rural);

In addition, the urban–rural disparity observed in this study highlights the influence of digital infrastructure on social media utilization. Students in urban areas were found to have greater access to stable internet connectivity, smartphones, and digital devices compared to their rural counterparts. This finding supports the digital divide theory, which emphasizes unequal access to ICT resources across geographical locations (van Dijk, 2006; van Dijk, 2021). Recent studies in developing contexts also confirm that infrastructural inequality remains a major determinant of digital participation among students, with rural learners often disadvantaged in both access and usage intensity (Ojo, 2022). Such disparities continue to influence students' engagement with digital platforms and educational technologies, thereby widening existing educational inequalities.

The age at which students were first exposed to social media

The findings of this study show that most CRS students in Enugu State were first exposed to social media during early secondary school years (JSS1–JSS3). This indicates that social media use begins relatively early in adolescence, a stage when students are still developing behavioural and cognitive control. The early exposure reflects the increasing availability of smartphones and internet access among school-age learners. This finding aligns with recent studies which report that adolescents are now introduced to social media earlier due to peer influence, parental access to mobile devices, and increased digital connectivity (Ojo, 2022; Irele & Arowolo, 2026). At this stage, students mainly use platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for communication and entertainment rather than academic purposes. Early exposure is significant because it contributes to the development of habitual usage patterns. Research shows that early users are more likely to maintain continuous engagement with social media over time, making it part of their daily routine (Junco, 2021; Nnaji et al., 2020). However, without proper guidance, early exposure may also affect self-regulation and academic focus, as students may struggle to manage screen time effectively (Aderele & Aliu, 2025). Theoretically, this pattern can be explained

by social learning theory, which suggests that students learn digital behaviours through observation and imitation of peers and family members.

Conclusion

This study concludes that CRS students are highly engaged in social media, mainly using platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube for communication and entertainment rather than academic purposes. The findings show that location and age of first exposure significantly influence usage patterns, with urban students and early exposure groups showing higher engagement, while gender differences are minimal. Overall, the findings highlight that while social media offers opportunities for communication and information sharing, its extensive use among CRS students raises concerns regarding time management, academic focus, and balanced lifestyle development. Therefore, there is a need for structured guidance from educators, parents, and school administrators to promote responsible and purposeful use of social media, ensuring that it contributes positively to students' academic, moral, and social development.

Recommendations

1. **Enhancement of Academic-Oriented Social Media Use:** Since the study revealed that CRS students predominantly use WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, while academic platforms such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate are minimally utilized, it is recommended that teachers and school administrators intentionally guide students toward more academically productive uses of social media. CRS educators should incorporate educational social media platforms into teaching strategies to help students recognize their academic value. In addition, students should be sensitized on the importance of balancing entertainment-based platforms with academic-oriented digital resources in order to enhance their learning outcomes.

2. **Regulation of Daily Social Media Usage:** Given that most CRS students spend between five and ten hours daily on social media, it is recommended that schools introduce structured digital wellbeing and time management education to help students regulate their screen time effectively. Guidance counsellors should play an active role in educating students on the potential academic implications of excessive social media use. Furthermore, parents should establish consistent monitoring and home-based rules that regulate the

duration and purpose of social media engagement, particularly during study periods.

3. **Promotion of Gender-Inclusive Digital Awareness:** Since the findings revealed only minimal differences in social media usage between male and female CRS students, it is recommended that educational interventions and policies should not be gender-biased but should instead target all students equally. Teachers and school administrators should design universal strategies that address responsible social media use without making assumptions based on gender. Additionally, future educational programmes should focus more on behavioural and contextual factors influencing usage rather than gender alone.

4. **Bridging the Urban–Rural Digital Divide:** In view of the finding that CRS students in urban areas have higher social media usage than those in rural areas, it is recommended that government and educational stakeholders intensify efforts to improve ICT infrastructure in rural secondary schools. This should include provision of stable internet access, digital devices, and supportive e-learning environments. Bridging this digital divide will ensure equitable access to information and enhance learning opportunities for students irrespective of location.

5. **Strengthening Early Digital Citizenship Education:** Since most CRS students were introduced to social media during early secondary school years, it is recommended that parents and guardians provide closer monitoring of children's early exposure to digital platforms to ensure responsible usage habits are developed from the onset. Schools should also introduce digital citizenship education at the junior secondary level to equip students with the knowledge and skills required for safe and balanced engagement with social media. Early awareness programmes should be emphasized to help students understand the long-term implications of uncontrolled digital exposure.

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