Social Media Usage and Risky Behaviour Pattern Among Secondary School Students: The Moderating Role of Gender and Location

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the moderating role of gender and school location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State. Using a correlational research design, the study involved 100 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students selected through multistage sampling from five secondary schools. Data were collected via structured questionnaires assessing social media usage, drug abuse, and risky behaviour patterns, and were analysed using Pearson's correlation and regression analyses at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed that gender and school location were not significantly associated with risky behaviour, suggesting that these behaviours transcend demographic boundaries and affect both male and female students in urban and rural schools alike. The results highlight that personal and social lifestyle factors, particularly digital engagement, play a more prominent role in shaping adolescents' risk-taking than demographic characteristics. Based on these findings, the study recommends holistic intervention programmes targeting social media and drug use, inclusive strategies that engage both genders, and the implementation of preventive measures across all school settings.

Keywords: *Social media usage, risky behaviour, secondary school students, gender, location*

INTRODUCTION

Social media usage refers to how individuals engage with digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) to create, share, or interact with information and with others. For many secondary school students, these platforms have become a routine part of daily life, shaping how they communicate, build friendships, and form perceptions about themselves and their peers. With easy access to smartphones, students are often online both during and after school hours. Although social media can support learning and broaden access to information, its unregulated use exposes adolescents to several risks, including inappropriate content, cyberbullying, unhealthy comparisons, and viral trends that encourage unsafe behaviour. Such exposure can influence how students think, feel, and make decisions, and in some cases may push them toward imitating behaviours that place them in harm's way (Eze & Adekunle, 2022).

Risky behaviour refers to actions that can harm a person's health, safety, or well-being. These behaviours include drug and alcohol use, unsafe sexual activities, reckless driving, and excessive use of social media. Risky behaviours often start during adolescence when individuals are curious, influenced by peers, or trying to deal with stress and emotions they do not fully understand. These behaviours can have serious consequences, such as addiction, accidents, poor school performance, or mental health problems (Maringe et al., 2023). As earlier mentioned, these kinds of behaviours are more likely to occur during adolescence due to the rapid changes they experience.

The effects of risky behaviour on students in Ethiope east Local Government Area are far-reaching, affecting not only the students themselves but also the overall learning environment. Many students who engage in risky behaviours such as drug abuse, truancy, early sexual activity, and excessive use of social media often experience a decline in academic performance. Teachers in some of the schools visited during the researcher's teaching practice reported that students involved in such behaviours of frequently missing classes, submit incomplete assignments, and perform poorly in tests and exams. This academic decline often leads to school dropouts, as some students become disengaged from school activities altogether. Additionally, risky behaviour

can lead to health complications, such as substance addiction, sexually transmitted infections, and mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression (Okafor & Nwankwo, 2021). These health issues can reduce students' capacity to concentrate and learn effectively, thereby compounding their academic struggles. In view of the above, this study aims to examine how gender and location influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour pattern among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Concerns have continued to rise among educators, parents, and health professionals regarding the growing involvement of secondary school students in behaviours that threaten their well-being. These behaviours include truancy, substance use, early sexual activity, violence, defiance of school authority, cultism, internet fraud, gambling, stealing, bullying, self-harm, and excessive engagement with social media. Cult-related incidents, often marked by intimidation and violence, have disrupted school activities and resulted in injuries and disciplinary actions. Similarly, the rise of internet fraud among both male and female students reflects a worrying shift toward criminal behaviour and a growing obsession with quick financial gains at the expense of academic development. The increasing popularity of gambling—whether online or in local betting centres—has also exposed students to financial loss, addictive tendencies, and loss of concentration in school.

These risky behaviours not only jeopardize students' academic performance but also pose significant threats to their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Students involved in such activities often experience declining grades, irregular school attendance, and weakened moral discipline. Over time, they face heightened risks of mental health challenges, low self-esteem, substance dependence, sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancies.

Insights from the researcher's teaching practice, along with reports from teachers and school administrators, indicate growing experimentation with substances such as tramadol and codeine, as well as intensive use of social media platforms that expose students to harmful trends and unwholesome influences. Despite widespread concern, there is limited empirical research examining how drug abuse and social media use jointly contribute to risky behaviour among adolescents in this locality. The central problem of this study, therefore, is to determine the extent to which drug abuse and social media usage influence risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to examine social media usage as determinant of risky behaviour pattern among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State. Specifically, the study investigated the following:

1. To determine the extent to which gender influences risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State.

2. To assess the extent to which school location influences risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent can gender influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State?

2. To what extent can school location influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State?

Research hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant moderating influence of gender on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant influence of location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Social Media

The term "social" in social media goes beyond simple interaction; it encompasses the creation of virtual communities and the building of social connections within digital spaces. These platforms help users develop social capital the networks of relationships and trust that support both personal growth and broader societal engagement. Kim and Kim (2020) note that social media strengthens both bonding capital, which involves close ties with friends and family, and bridging capital, which connects individuals to distant or unfamiliar people. This expansion of social networks provides greater access to information, emotional support, and diverse viewpoints. However, the same interconnectedness can introduce challenges such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and privacy concerns, which can complicate the benefits of these platforms. Social media also plays a significant role in identity formation and self-presentation, particularly among adolescents and young adults. These platforms offer spaces for users to experiment with and display aspects of their identity through profiles, posts, photos, and comments. Digital self-presentation is often carefully curated to gain social approval, and as Yang et al. (2021) observe, the pursuit of likes, shares, and followers can create pressure to conform to perceived social norms, affecting self-esteem, body image, and psychological well-being. For some, unmet expectations in this online validation can lead to emotional distress or even addictive behaviour.

In education, social media has become an important tool for learning and knowledge sharing. Platforms like YouTube, LinkedIn, and even Instagram provide tutorials, webinars, and collaborative spaces that support both formal and informal education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these platforms were instrumental in maintaining communication between teachers and students, enabling continued access to educational resources despite school closures. Mohammed et al. (2022) found that many educators and students in sub-Saharan Africa relied on WhatsApp and Telegram to facilitate learning, although digital literacy and internet access limited the effectiveness of these tools.

Social media has also transformed commerce and marketing by allowing businesses to engage directly with consumers in real time. Influencer marketing, where individuals with large followings promote products, has proven particularly effective among youth. Li and Xie (2023) highlight that consumers often trust influencers more than traditional advertising, making social media a powerful platform for shaping purchasing behaviour. At the same time, commercialization raises concerns about data privacy, targeted advertising, and the manipulation of user behaviour through algorithm-driven content.

Concept of Risky Behaviour

Risky behaviour is not solely a matter of observable actions; it also has a strong psychological dimension often linked to underlying mental health challenges. Many adolescents engage in high-risk activities as a way to cope with emotional distress, including depression, anxiety, trauma, or low self-esteem. In such cases, behaviours like self-harm or substance use may provide temporary relief from emotional pain, yet they often exacerbate mental health problems, creating a cycle of harm and maladaptive coping. Iheanacho et al. (2022) highlight a significant correlation between undiagnosed mental health conditions and the prevalence of risky behaviour among Nigerian adolescents, emphasizing the need for early identification and integration of mental health services in schools and communities. Substance abuse is among the most documented forms of risky behaviour, encompassing the use of illicit drugs, misuse of prescription medications, and excessive alcohol consumption. Beyond impairing cognitive and motor functions, substance use increases vulnerability to accidents, violence, and poor academic performance, and can have long-term health consequences such as

addiction and neurological damage. Nwachukwu and Eze (2023) observed that students who regularly consumed alcohol and cannabis were more prone to unsafe sexual practices and academic dishonesty, highlighting the interconnected nature of risky behaviours and the need for comprehensive prevention strategies.

`Unsafe sexual activity remains another significant concern, including unprotected sex, early sexual debut, and multiple sexual partners. These behaviours heighten the risk of sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies, and emotional trauma. Contributing factors include limited reproductive health education, cultural taboos, and reliance on peers or online sources for information, which are often inaccurate. Akinwande et al. (2021) found that students lacking knowledge of reproductive health were more likely to engage in unprotected sex, underscoring the importance of education and open dialogue.

Digital risky behaviours are an emerging challenge in today's technology-driven environment. Adolescents increasingly face risks such as cyberbullying, sexting, digital addiction, exposure to harmful content, and oversharing personal information. The anonymity and immediacy of online interactions can encourage behaviours that individuals might avoid offline, while platforms may promote dangerous trends and misinformation. Umeh and Adeola (2022) caution that without adequate digital literacy, young people are vulnerable to online harms that can have emotional, psychological, and even legal consequences, highlighting the need for interventions that specifically address digital behaviours alongside traditional risk factors.

Relationship between Social Media Usage And Risky Behaviour

Research indicates that gender shapes the way social media usage relates to risky behaviour. Adolescent girls often use social media for relational and emotional purposes, which can expose them to risks such as sexting, online grooming, and emotional manipulation. Boys, in contrast, are more likely to engage in competitive or thrill-seeking online challenges. Cookingham et al. (2020) observed that highly active girls on visual platforms were more susceptible to sexting and sexual coercion, while boys tended toward dangerous stunts and physical risk-taking. This highlights the need to consider how social media interacts with sociocultural norms, shaping risky behaviours differently across genders.

Another key factor is digital addiction. Excessive and compulsive engagement with social media can foster behavioural addiction, characterized by impulsivity and poor self-regulation, which in turn increases the likelihood of risky behaviours. Bányai et al. (2021) found that social media addiction was significantly linked to low academic performance, substance use, and interpersonal conflicts. The design of these platforms, which relies on algorithmic reinforcement and intermittent rewards, encourages compulsive checking, emotional dependence, and escapism, undermining adolescents' ability to make sound decisions. Environmental and structural factors also play a role. Weak regulation and inconsistent monitoring of online content allow harmful material to circulate unchecked, often bypassing filters through subtle visual or coded cues. Limited digital literacy, especially in developing contexts, further increases vulnerability, as users struggle to critically evaluate online content or recognize manipulative practices. Consequently, systemic interventions are essential to reduce the risks associated with social media usage.

While a strong correlation exists between social media engagement and risky behaviour, causality remains complex. Factors such as personality traits, family environment, and offline peer influences can confound this relationship. Boer et al. (2022) emphasize the need for longitudinal and experimental studies to clarify causal pathways. Nonetheless, the consistent associations observed across different contexts underscore the importance of addressing social media as a significant influence on adolescent risk-taking.

Influence of Gender on the relationship between Social Media Usage and Risky Behaviour Patterns

Risky behaviour, often characterized by actions that increase the likelihood of harm to oneself or others, has been the focus of extensive scholarly inquiry in relation to gender differences. Numerous recent studies have consistently demonstrated that gender plays a significant role in shaping behavioural tendencies and the likelihood of engaging in high-risk activities. A predominant body of research asserts that males are generally more prone to risky behaviours compared to females, especially during adolescence and young adulthood. For instance, Bhattacharya et al. (2022) reported that male adolescents displayed significantly higher levels of substance use, reckless driving, and risky sexual practices than their female counterparts, attributing these

differences to biological predispositions, social expectations, and cultural norms that reinforce masculine ideals of risk-taking. In contrast, female individuals are often socialized into behaviours that prioritize safety and caution, contributing to their relatively lower participation in high-risk activities.

Psychological and neurobiological theories offer further insight into the gendered nature of risky behaviours. Neurological studies suggest that the prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control and decision-making, matures earlier in females than in males. This developmental lag in males could account for their increased inclination toward impulsive and risk-laden actions during adolescence and early adulthood (Zhou et al., 2023). Additionally, hormonal factors such as higher testosterone levels in males have been linked to heightened sensation-seeking and aggressive tendencies, which in turn may predispose them to behaviours like physical altercations, drug abuse, and unprotected sex (Cao et al., 2022). Social learning theory also explains that young males often emulate peer group behaviours that valorize risk, further reinforcing gender-based disparities in risk-taking patterns.

On the other hand, emerging research suggests that gender differences in risky behaviour are narrowing, particularly in domains influenced by sociocultural transformation and digital exposure. With the increasing presence of women in traditionally male-dominated environments and the relaxation of rigid gender norms, females are reportedly engaging in behaviours once seen as predominantly male. For example, Karki et al. (2021) found that while male adolescents still engage in more physical and substance-related risks, female adolescents are showing increased participation in emotional and social forms of risky behaviour, such as cyberbullying, sexting, and emotional manipulation. The rise in social media use among both genders has further complicated the dynamics, exposing both males and females to unique risks shaped by online environments.

Influence of Location on the relationship between Social Media Usage and Risky Behaviour Patterns

Research on the relationship between location—particularly urban and rural settings—and risky behaviour has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, with findings pointing to the complex influence of geographical, socio-economic, and cultural contexts on individual behaviour. Risky behaviour, which includes actions such as drug use, unsafe sexual practices, aggressive conduct, reckless driving, and delinquency, has been found to vary significantly between urban and rural populations due to differences in access to social infrastructure, exposure to peer influence, availability of recreational activities, and cultural norms (Olatayo & Adeyemi, 2021). Urban environments, often characterized by population density, anonymity, and greater accessibility to substances and digital technologies, tend to report higher incidences of risky behaviours among youths and adolescents. In contrast, rural areas may experience a lower overall prevalence but face challenges related to underreporting, cultural denial, and limited access to preventive health services.

Empirical literature consistently supports the assertion that urban youths are more prone to engage in multiple risky behaviours than their rural counterparts. A study by Fadoju et al. (2023) revealed that adolescents residing in urban areas in Nigeria reported higher levels of substance use, sexual experimentation, and social deviance compared to those in rural areas. The authors attributed these patterns to the greater autonomy, peer pressure, and exposure to modern lifestyles that urban youth typically experience. Furthermore, the increased accessibility of drugs, alcohol, and internet-connected devices in urban settings contributes to the likelihood of risky decision-making among adolescents. Conversely, rural youth tend to be more embedded in community networks with higher levels of parental monitoring and social regulation, which can mitigate engagement in high-risk activities. However, rural adolescents may still be at risk due to socio-economic hardship, lack of education, and limited recreational or vocational opportunities, which can foster frustration and rebellion manifesting as risky behaviour (Chukwuma & Nwafor, 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between social media usage, and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State. The population consisted of 4,294 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students in the 2024/2025 academic session, as reported by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, Asaba (2025). SS2 students were chosen because they are generally more adjusted to the academic and social demands of senior secondary

education, unlike SS1 students who are still transitioning, and SS3 students who face final-year examination pressures.

A sample of 100 students was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Five secondary schools were randomly chosen, and 20 students (10 males and 10 females) were then randomly selected from each school. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising two sections. Section A captured demographic information, while Section B included rating scales measuring drug abuse, social media usage, and risky behaviour patterns on a four-point Likert scale. The scales were developed from existing literature to assess various aspects of substance use, online engagement, and behaviours that threaten students' well-being. The instrument's validity was confirmed through expert review, and reliability was tested on 30 students in obiaruku, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.86, 0.81, and 0.79 for the Drug Abuse, Social Media Usage, and Risky Behaviour Pattern scales, respectively. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires, ensuring immediate retrieval to prevent data loss. Data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and coefficient of determination addressed the research questions, while regression and multiple regression analyses tested the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: To what extent can gender influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns?

Table 1: Analysis of the extent to which gender influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns

Variable	***N***	***R***	r^2	r^2%	**Decision**
Gender	100	0.169	0.029	2.9	Low positive extent
Social Media Usage					
Risky Behaviour Pattern					

Table 1 presents the analysis of the extent to which gender influences the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns. The result shows a correlation coefficient (r = 0.169) and a coefficient of determination (r^2 = 0.029). This indicates that gender accounts for 2.9% of the variation in the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among the respondents. Since the coefficient of determination is 2.9%, the extent to which gender influences the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns is low and positive.

Research Question 2: To what extent can school location influence the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State?

Table 2: Analysis of the influence of school location and risky behaviour pattern among secondary school students

Variable	***N***	***r***	r^2	r^2%	**Decision**
School location	100	0.323	0.104	10.4	Low and Positive extent
Social Media Usage					
Risky behaviour pattern					

Table 2 presents the analysis of the extent to which school location influences the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students. The result shows a correlation coefficient (r = 0.323) and a coefficient of determination (r^2 = 0.104). This indicates that school location accounts for 10.4% of the variation in the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among

the respondents. Since the coefficient of determination is 10.4%, the extent to which school location influences the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns is low and positive.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant influence of gender on relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State

Table 3: Regression analysis of the relationship between gender and risky behaviour pattern among secondary school students

Model	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	P
Regression	160.974	2	160.974	1.917	.169
Residual	8228.026	97	83.959		
Total	8389.000	99			

Table 3 presents the regression analysis of the influence of gender on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students. The result shows a computed F-value of 1.917 with a corresponding p-value of .169. Testing the hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance, the p-value (.169) is greater than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected. This implies that gender does not have a significant influence on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant influence of location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns in Ethiope east Local Government Area of Delta State

Table 4: Regression analysis of the relationship between school location and risky behaviour pattern among secondary school students

Model	Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	P
Regression	83.616	2	83.616	0.2987	.323
Residual	8305.384	97	84.749		
Total	8389.000	99			

Table 4 is the result of a regression analysis of the influence of location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns. The result shows that $F(1, 98) = 0.2987$, $p>0.05$ level of significance. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted, meaning that there is no significant influence of location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study revealed that there is no significant influence of gender on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State. This implies that gender does not have a significant influence on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State. The observed relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns is therefore not significantly affected by whether the students are male or female.This finding aligns with previous studies by Chukwu et al. (2022) and Adeyemi and Salami (2022), which also highlighted the link between heavy social media use and risky adolescent behaviour and that gender does not moderate the relationship. This outcome supports findings by Okoro and Nwankwo (2021) and Eze and Chukwu (2023), which reported comparable levels of risky behaviour across genders.Similarly, school location was not significantly associated with risky behaviour patterns. Adolescents in both urban and rural schools experience comparable pressures—peer influence, academic demands, and psychosocial stressors that shape their engagement in risk-taking. This finding corroborates previous research by Okonkwo and Ede (2021) and

Nwankwo et al. (2022), which observed minimal differences in risky behaviour between students from different locations, emphasizing the universal nature of these challenges.

The finding of this study revealed that there is no significant influence of school location on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State. A possible explanation for this finding is that the accessibility of internet enabled devices and social media platforms has kept rising across different locations. the general availability of smartphones, mobile internet services, and digital technologies has reduced the usual differences between urban and rural students in reaching social media. consequently, students from different school locations are exposed to similar online content, discussions, and pressures, which could end up in comparable risky behaviour pattern. However the finding does not aligned with Olatayo and Adeyemi (2021) who reported that in urban settings, with higher population density , more anonymity, and easier access to digital technologies and substances, the incidences of risky behaviours among adolescents and youths tend to be higher.. In the same line, Fadoju et al. (2023) similarly observed that urban youths were more inclined to take part in several risky behaviours, rather than rural youths, largely due to stronger peer influence, technological innovations, and wider social opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that gender and school location exert only a low positive influence on the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns among secondary school students in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State. However, these influences were not statistically significant. This implies that the relationship between social media usage and risky behaviour patterns is largely independent of students' gender and school location. Also, the lack of a significant relationship with gender or school location suggests that such behaviours are widespread, affecting both male and female students across urban and rural settings. This underscores that peer influence and shared social experiences, rather than demographic factors, are key drivers of adolescent risk-taking.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were advanced:

1. Holistic intervention programmes should be developed that address the combined effects of drug abuse and excessive social media usage.
2. Interventions to curb risky behaviours should not be gender-specific but inclusive, ensuring both male and female students benefit equally.
3. Prevention and intervention strategies against risky behaviours be implemented across all schools, regardless of whether they are in urban or rural areas.

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