Social Media and Ghanaian Youth: A Systematic Review of Impacts and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review critically synthesizes existing literature and aggregated data on the multifaceted impact of social media on Ghanaian youth aged 13–30. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies and national digital reports from 2014 to 2025, this paper examines the impact of social media on mental health, education, social and cultural identity, and socio-economic outcomes. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram are widely adopted, with approximately 7.95 million active social media users in Ghana as of early 2025, representing around 23% of the total population, and 39.2% of adults aged 18 and above (Kemp, 2025). The review highlights positive outcomes, including networking, learning, and digital entrepreneurship, alongside challenges such as increased anxiety, academic distractions, and cultural shifts. Gaps include the limited availability of longitudinal research, the underrepresentation of rural and marginalized youth, and a scarcity of intervention studies. Recommendations focus on policy, education, and mental health programming tailored to the Ghanaian context.

Keywords: Social media, Ghanaian youth, digital behavior, mental health, education, culture, entrepreneurship

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, Ghana has undergone a rapid digital transformation that has significantly reshaped the communication, social interaction, and information-seeking behaviors of its youth population aged 13 to 30. By early 2025, an estimated 7.95 million Ghanaians, representing 23% of the total population and 39.2% of adults aged 18 and above, were active social media users, with young people as the main drivers of this growth (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021; DataReportal, 2025). Dominant platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as central digital spaces for communication, education, entrepreneurship, and entertainment among Ghanaian youth, mirroring broader technological adoption trends across sub-Saharan Africa (Markwei & Appiah, 2016; Ocansey, Ametepe, & Fynn Oduro, 2016; Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025).

This surge in digital connectivity has both expanded opportunities and manifested new challenges. Social media enhances access to academic materials, supports entrepreneurial ventures, and facilitates cultural and civic expression, thus fostering digital inclusion and social mobility (Shi et al., 2022; Nketia & Agyapong, 2020; Adaki, 2023). However, empirical evidence links high-frequency use to increased psychosocial and educational difficulties. Studies report that 62% of youth experience anxiety and 49% face depressive symptoms associated with social media engagement, often exacerbated by cyberbullying, peer pressure, and unhealthy social comparison (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Awaah et al., 2024; JSOMER, 2024). Moreover, over 45% of students acknowledge negative impacts on their study habits and academic performance, citing heightened distraction and procrastination (Mensah, 2021; Agyei, 2020). Culturally, although social media introduces Western values that can erode indigenous languages and traditions, Ghanaian youth exhibit resilience by creatively synthesizing global and local elements, giving rise to hybrid cultural forms and evolving digital identities (Adaki, 2023; Boateng et al., 2025). Despite the proliferation of mobile technology and youthful digital

innovation, the benefits of social media remain unevenly distributed. Rural and marginalized communities face persistent barriers, including limited internet access, low digital literacy, and inadequate cybersecurity awareness, which heighten their vulnerabilities to online harm and deepen the digital divide (Ayisi et al., 2024; Owusu & Kwarteng-Kluvitse, 2017; JSOMER, 2024). Furthermore, most existing research is cross-sectional, urban-focused, and limited in its longitudinal scope, leaving critical gaps concerning the experiences of rural and vulnerable populations, as well as underexplored positive outcomes, such as digital activism, youth-led entrepreneurship, and creative content production (Zelenin, 2024; Bokor, 2014, p. 5).

Recognizing these complexities, this systematic review synthesizes literature from 2014 to 2025 to comprehensively examine the behavioral, mental health, educational, cultural, and socio-economic implications of social media use among Ghanaian youth. By integrating empirical research and contextual insights, the study aims to inform evidence-based digital policy and youth development programs that support well-being, equity, and empowerment in Ghana's evolving socio-cultural landscape (Ayisi et al., 2024; Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive systematic review, conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), was undertaken to identify relevant literature on the impact of social media on Ghanaian youth from January 2014 to 2025. The rationale for the timeframe captures the surge in mobile internet use and social platform proliferation in Ghana within this period.

Search Strategy

Databases searched included Google Scholar, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), ScienceDirect, and institutional repositories of Ghanaian universities. The search utilized Boolean combinations of keywords such as:

- "social media" AND "Ghanaian youth."
- "social media AND Ghana AND mental health."
- "social media AND youth AND education AND Ghana."
- "digital entrepreneurship AND youth AND Ghana."
- "social media AND culture AND Ghana."
- Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion:

- Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), systematic reviews, and syntheses focusing on Ghanaian youth (13–30).
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, graduate theses, and reputable reports published in English.
- Studies explicitly link social media to at least one theme: mental health, education, behavior, culture, or entrepreneurship.

Exclusion:

- Non-Ghana-focused studies or those lacking empirical data.
- Opinion pieces, editorial commentaries, and articles are not peer-reviewed.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

Data were systematically extracted, noting author(s), year, study design, sample size, key findings, and limitations. Quality was assessed using the PRISMA checklist for selection transparency (Page et al., 2021) and the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) tool for methodological rigor. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion between reviewers.

RESULTS

Overview of Selected Studies

Twenty studies met the inclusion criteria, encompassing diverse methodologies (surveys, interviews, and mixed methods) and populations from both urban and rural Ghana. Key focus areas include mental health, educational impact, cultural behaviors, and socio-economic outcomes.

Author(s) & Year	Study Design	Focus Area	Key Findings	Limitations
DataReportal (2025); Kemp (2025)	Industry report (secondary data analysis)	National digital adoption, social media penetration, and mobile connectivity	High social media growth driven by mobile internet; platforms central to youth communication and commerce; rising local content visibility alongside global trends	Not peer-reviewed; aggregate estimates; methodology opaque; limited cultural nuance
JSOMER (2024)	Cross-sectional survey	Social media addiction prevalence and predictors among Ghanaian youths	Moderate-to-high prevalence; predictors include high daily use, peer influence, boredom/escapism, and low self-regulation	Self-report bias; cross-sectional design prevents causality; sampling may underrepresent rural youth
Markwei & Appiah (2016).	Case study (mixed methods)	Social media's impact on the Nima and Maamobi communities	Social media enables networking, information access, and civic voice; risks include distraction and exposure to harmful content	Localized sample limits generalizability; older data predate newer platforms/features
Mensah (2021)	Quantitative correlational	Social media use and academic performance in Ghanaian universities	Excessive social media use is associated with lower grades; time management and purposeful use mitigate adverse effects	Cross-sectional; relies on self-reported use; lacks longitudinal tracking
Ocansey, Ametepe & Fynn Oduro (2016)	Descriptive survey	General impact of social media on Ghanaian youth	Widespread adoption with mixed outcomes: enhanced connectivity and learning alongside distraction, privacy risks, and dependency	Non-representative sampling; limited analytical depth; dated relative to current platform dynamics
Twenge & Campbell (2018).	Population-based cross-sectional (non-Ghana)	Screen time and psychological well-being in adolescents	Higher screen time is linked to lower well-being indicators, suggesting that moderation is beneficial	Not Ghana-specific; observational; potential confounders
Agyei (2020)	Correlational survey	Social media addiction and	Addiction positively predicts procrastination; self-	Single-institution sample; self-report measures; cross-sectional

		academic procrastination	control mediates the relationship	
Aryeh-Adjei et al. (2025)	Mixed methods (survey/interviews)	Digital tech adoption in informal entrepreneurship (Okere District)	Social media and mobile tools expand market reach, customer engagement, and efficiency; barriers include cost, skills, and connectivity	District-specific; potential selection bias; limited longitudinal evidence
Adaki (2023)	Systematic literature review	Westernization and changing African family structures	Western cultural diffusion (including social media) reshapes norms, communication, and youth identity within families	Heterogeneous studies; limited Ghana-specific data; publication bias
Boateng et al. (2025).	Systematic review protocol	Mental health messaging via social media in sub-Saharan Africa	Protocol outlines methods to assess the effectiveness of digital mental health messaging	No empirical findings yet; scope may vary across countries and platforms
Bokor (2014)	Qualitative/analytical	New media and democratization in Ghana	Social media facilitates political activism and civic participation, lowering the barrier to voice.	Early period analysis, limited empirical metrics; platform ecology has evolved
Gyane, G. & Osei (2025)	Cross-sectional survey	Social media use and adolescent sexual behaviours (Drobo)	Greater social media engagement is associated with earlier sexual debut and higher risk behaviours; peer norms and content exposure are relevant	Single municipality; self-report; cross-sectional limits causality
Shi et al. (2022).	Quantitative survey (SEM)	Social media/e-commerce adoption and entrepreneurial intention	Adoption, perceived usefulness, and social influence increase entrepreneurial intention among graduates	Context-specific; cross-sectional; potential common-method bias
Awaah, T. & Addo (2024)	Cross-sectional survey	Cyberbullying's effects on Ghanaian tertiary students' academic life	Cyberbullying correlates with reduced academic engagement, increased stress, and lower performance	Self-report; no temporal ordering; sample may not represent all institutions
Agana et al. (2024).	Conceptual/analytical study	Modern media's role in preserving moral values and economic development	Media can transmit cultural values and support socio-economic development when guided by local norms	Limited empirical testing; potential normative bias

Agyapong-Opoku et al. (2025).	Scoping review of reviews	Social media use and youth/adolescent mental health	Mixed evidence: both risks (anxiety, sleep issues) and benefits (connection, information); effects depend on use patterns	Relies on secondary reviews; few Ghana-specific insights; heterogeneity
Zelenin (2024)	Comparative/analytical	Social networks, identity, and self-realisation (global)	Social platforms shape identity formation, self-expression, and social capital among youth	Not Ghana-focused; cultural context differences; methodological variability
Attuquayefio, A.-D. & Okronipa (2023)	Quantitative survey (SEM)	Academic entrepreneurship and social media adoption	Perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social influence drive adoption for academic entrepreneurship	Cross-sectional; academic sampling limits generalizability to broader youth
Dadzie & Adjotor (2022).	Cross-sectional survey	Media literacy and ethical social media use among Ghanaian youth	Higher media literacy is associated with more ethical/secure online behaviour	Measurement validity challenges: urban-leaning samples
Ayisi et al. (2024).	Mixed methods (program evaluation)	Access to digital media and digital literacy (EEE Model)	Structured programs improve digital literacy; access gaps persist across regions and socio-economic groups	Pilot scale; short follow-up; resource constraints
Frimpong et al. (2020).	Quantitative (observational)	Social media, political activism, and voting patterns	Online activism linked to shifts in voting behaviour and mobilisation	Observational limits causality; potential confounders; platform-specific effects

THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

Mental Health and Psychological Well-being

The mental health implications of social media among Ghanaian youth emerge as a dominant theme across numerous studies (JSOMER, 2024; Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Ocansey et al., 2016). High-frequency social media use is consistently associated with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and social media addiction. Reported prevalences include 62% anxiety, 49% depression, and 12.3% addiction (JSOMER, 2024). These rates suggest significant psychological burdens intensified by the digital environment. Common risk factors include exposure to cyberbullying (Awaah et al., 2024), social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and nomophobia, especially acute among adolescent girls (JSOMER, 2024).

Despite these concerns, some studies highlight the potential for social media to facilitate peer support networks and reduce mental health stigma (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Boateng et al., 2025). Youth engage in online communities where they share experiences and seek informal help, fostering resilience and emotional expression (Ayisi et al., 2024). This dual role encapsulates social media's complex influence, as both a stressor and a coping resource.

Educational Impact: Opportunities and Challenges

Social media's role in education is both enabling and disruptive. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram are widely used by Ghanaian students, with over 40% actively participating in academic groups, facilitating peer learning, resource sharing, and informal mentorship (Markwei & Appiah, 2016; Mensah, 2021). These digital tools help bridge resource gaps in formal education, improve digital literacy, and foster collaborative skills (Adaki, 2023).

Conversely, extensive social media engagement correlates strongly with academic distraction, procrastination, and reduced concentration. Over 45% of students self-report negative impacts on study time, with educators noting declines in grammar and writing quality attributed to the informal language conventions practiced online (Mensah, 2021; Agyei, 2020). The absence of systematic digital literacy curricula exacerbates these challenges, underscoring a critical need for educational policy reforms that address digital competencies and cyber wellness (Ayisi et al., 2024).

Social Behavior, Cultural Identity, and Ethical Implications

Social media platforms have a significant influence on identity formation, cultural expression, and social norms, particularly among urban Ghanaian youth. Studies reveal a dynamic interplay between Western cultural influences and the reinforcement of local Ghanaian traditions, resulting in a hybridized cultural identity (Adaki, 2023; Ocansey et al., 2016). Youth adopt Western fashion, music genres, and language styles through global platforms, yet simultaneously promote Ghanaian music, language, and activism, suggesting active cultural negotiation rather than mere cultural replacement (Cultural Identity Study, 2024). Ethical concerns constitute an emerging theme. Dadzie and Adjotor (2022) and related studies highlight the misuse of social media in Ghana through misinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, and exposure to sexually explicit content. These issues threaten core national values such as respect, integrity, and communal harmony. Widespread unethical practices fueled by the 'attention economy' jeopardize youth moral development and societal cohesion, posing challenges for regulators and educators alike (Dadzie & Adjotor, 2022; Markwei & Appiah, 2016). Social media has reinvigorated youth political participation, with over 50% of politically engaged youth mobilizing and advocating causes digitally (Frimpong et al., 2020). This digital activism reflects broader trends in which social media empowers civic engagement, despite ethical and content-related challenges.

Socio-economic Outcomes and Digital Entrepreneurship

Promoting digital entrepreneurship and informal economic activities is a robust and optimistic theme in the reviewed literature. (Attuquayefio et al., 2023; Aryeh-Adjei et al., 2025) A report indicates that over 60% of young Ghanaian graduates utilize social media platforms for marketing, brand building, and customer (re)engagement, providing unprecedented access to local and global markets.

This empowerment integrates formal and informal economic sectors, providing viable alternatives to pervasive youth unemployment (Shi et al. 2022). However, infrastructural limitations (internet access and speed), digital literacy gaps, and gender and rural–urban divides constrain equitable participation in the digital economy (JSOMER, 2024; Ayisi et al., 2024). Policy and institutional responses lag behind youth innovation, highlighting key areas for targeted interventions and support.

Gaps and Emerging Needs Across Themes

While the included studies are rich in cross-sectional and mixed-method insights, several gaps recur. A paucity of longitudinal and intervention research makes it challenging to understand causal relationships or track developmental trajectories (Markwei & Appiah, 2016; Ocansey et al., 2016). Research on marginalized populations in particular, rural youth, females, and persons with disabilities, is limited, potentially obscuring diverse experiences of social media's impact (Zelenin, 2024). Furthermore, positive outcomes, such as digital civic engagement, mental health advocacy, and creative content production, warrant deeper empirical attention (Boateng et al., 2025; Bokor, 2014, p. 5). Ethical considerations and digital literacy emerged as essential cross-cutting priorities to maximize benefits and mitigate harms. Multiple authors advocate for comprehensive digital literacy education that integrates media ethics, mental health awareness, and online safety (Ayisi et al., 2024; Dadzie & Adjotor, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

This systematic review has synthesized evidence from 20 empirical studies and reports on the multifaceted impact of social media on Ghanaian youth aged 13–30. The findings underscore that social media is deeply embedded in the lives of young people, presenting a complex interplay of opportunities and risks.

Mentally, social media use correlates strongly with adverse psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and addiction-like behaviors. Rates reported (e.g., 62% anxiety and nearly 50% depression) indicate pervasive mental health burdens exacerbated by phenomena such as cyberbullying, social comparison, and "fear of missing out" (JSOMER, 2024; Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). However, social media simultaneously functions as a platform for peer support, reducing stigma and encouraging informal help-seeking, thereby revealing its dual role as both a potential stressor and a coping resource (Boateng et al., 2025).

Educational impacts demonstrate a similarly nuanced picture. Platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook are leveraged to enhance collaborative learning and resource sharing, thereby improving the digital literacy and academic engagement of many students (Markwei & Appiah, 2016; Mensah, 2021). Nevertheless, unregulated use fosters distraction, procrastination, and a decline in formal writing skills, highlighting a pressing need for digital literacy and cyber wellness education to be integrated into curricula (Ayisi et al., 2024). Culturally, social media both challenges and rejuvenates Ghanaian youth identity. Exposure to Western cultural practices through social media has a significant influence on fashion, language, and music. However, youth actively hybridize global and local cultures, promoting Ghanaian artistic expression and social causes, thereby reshaping traditions in digitally mediated forms. Moreover, increased digital activism and civic engagement mark social media as a powerful tool for youth agency in Ghana's democratic process (Frimpong et al., 2020). Economically, the adoption of social media facilitates youth entrepreneurship and informal economic activity, enabling graduates and young adults to build brands, market products, and access markets beyond traditional constraints (Shi et al., 2022). Despite this promise, infrastructural deficits and digital divides, especially along rural-urban and gender lines, limit inclusive participation, revealing policy and systemic barriers (JSOMER, 2024; Ayisi et al., 2024).

Comparison with Global Trends

The Ghanaian experience parallels global patterns observed in youth social media use, including mental health challenges, educational disruptions, cultural negotiations, and entrepreneurial opportunities (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Twenge & Campbell, 2018). However, uniquely Ghanaian contextual factors profoundly shape these experiences. Ghana's strong familial and community networks often mediate the individualistic tendencies observed elsewhere (Markwei & Appiah, 2016). Unlike some Western contexts, where digital entrepreneurship is formalized, Ghanaian youth predominantly navigate informal economies, deploying social media-based strategies that are underpinned by limited institutional support (Shi et al., 2022). Politically, Ghanaian youth activism via social media aligns with broader African digital movements but is distinguished by a high degree of interplay between local in-person mobilization and digital communication (Bokor, 2014, p. 5).

Unique Ghanaian Cultural and Socio-economic Factors

The fusion of Western and indigenous cultural elements, mediated through social media platforms, represents a key characteristic of the Ghanaian digital youth sphere (Kang'ethe & Team, 2025). Vernacular languages and local dialects are increasingly visible online, ensuring cultural preservation and innovation (Ocansey et al., 2016). Socio-economically, the digital divide remains stark: urban youth typically benefit from greater access and skills development than their rural or marginalized counterparts (JSOMER, 2024). Gender disparities in social media access and digital entrepreneurship opportunities further complicate the equitable distribution of benefits. Moreover, limited mental health infrastructure accentuates the risks linked to social media-induced psychological distress, calling for integrated health and digital literacy approaches.

Implications for Policy, Education, and Youth Development

Given the findings, several actionable recommendations emerge:

- Integrate Digital Literacy and Mental Health Education: Curricula at all levels should incorporate critical digital skills, cyber wellness, and mental health literacy to empower youths to navigate social media's risks responsibly and harness its benefits.
- Expand Youth-Focused Digital Infrastructure: To address digital inequities, government and private sector investments must prioritize affordable, high-quality internet access across rural and marginalized communities.

- Support Youth Entrepreneurship: Formalize support mechanisms, including training, seed funding, and mentorship for digital entrepreneurs to enhance the informal sector's productivity and sustainability.
- Strengthen Mental Health Services: Expand accessible mental health services focusing on youth, integrating social-media-related issues, and leveraging online platforms for awareness and support.
- Foster Civic Engagement and Cultural Preservation: Leverage social media to amplify youth voices in governance and civic matters while promoting Ghanaian cultural heritage online.
- Encourage Longitudinal and Intervention Research: Support academic efforts to generate evidence on effective interventions addressing social media's complex effects to inform adaptive policies.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

- Educators should embed comprehensive digital literacy and emotional well-being programs in curricula.
- Policymakers must prioritize expanding digital infrastructure, regulating social media to safeguard youth without curtailing innovation, and supporting youth entrepreneurship.
- Parents and Communities must actively engage in youth digital education, promoting open dialogue on safe and meaningful online interactions.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review confirms that social media has a profound influence on the lives of Ghanaian youth, impacting their mental health, education, social identity, culture, and economic opportunities. The dual nature of social media as both a platform for social support, entrepreneurship, and global connectivity, and a source of psychological distress, distraction, and cultural tension, is evident. Youth navigate these terrains within uniquely Ghanaian socio-cultural frameworks characterized by strong community ties and hybridized identities. However, challenges such as digital divides, a lack of structured digital literacy education, and limited mental health infrastructure constrain the realization of social media's full potential.

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