

# A Qualitative Exploration of Social Media Usage and its Influence on Social Capital among Youths Residing in Urban Areas of Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In Nigeria, social media adoption has grown rapidly, particularly among urban youths, who use these platforms as a primary mode of communication. As Nigeria continues to experience rapid urbanization and population growth, particularly among its youth, understanding how social media shapes social capital is crucial for addressing both social and economic development challenges. This study aims to explore social media usage and its influence on social capital development and sustainability using qualitative methods.

**Methods:** This study employed a qualitative design using in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD). The population consisted of youths aged 18-35 years residing in urban areas such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kano. Eight youths were selected for IDIs and seven for one FGD using convenience sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and discussions, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

**Results:** Five key themes emerged: (1) Usage Patterns and Motivations, highlighting platform-specific roles (e.g., Instagram for visual connection, TikTok for entertainment); (2) Network Building and Trust, emphasizing social media's role in forming and maintaining relationships with varying trust levels; (3) Civic Participation through Social Media, showing platforms' facilitation of information access and mobilization; (4) Comparative Impact of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, revealing differential influences on interactions (e.g., Instagram for intimacy, Facebook for community trust); and (5) Overall Perception of Social Media's Role, indicating positive impacts on social life with caveats about misinformation and overload.

**Discussion:** The findings extend social capital theory by illustrating how platform affordances in the Global South context differentially support bonding (Instagram/TikTok) and bridging (Facebook) capital among urban Nigerian youth. Novel contributions include mechanisms like Instagram's visuality fostering intimacy and Facebook's groups enabling civic mobilization. Implications include recommendations for policymakers and educators.

**Conclusion:** Urban Nigerian youth leverage social media for bonding and bridging social capital, with platforms reshaping interactions in digitalized contexts.

**Keywords:** Social media, Instagram, Facebook, Lagos, Social capital

## BACKGROUND

In Nigeria, social media adoption has grown rapidly, particularly among urban youths aged 18-35, who use these platforms as a primary mode of communication (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). With more than half of Nigeria's population under 30 years old, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become central to daily life and social interactions (Tsebee, 2024). These platforms facilitate communication and serve as vehicles for creating, maintaining, and expanding social capital, the networks, trust, and resources derived from social ties (Imoka, 2023).

Urban environments in Nigeria, characterized by high density and diversity, foster social capital development but also present challenges like unemployment and social exclusion (Jemiluyi & Jeke, 2024). In these settings, youths turn to social media for support, advice, and opportunities (Ezeaka et al., 2025). Research indicates social

media fosters bonding capital (close ties) and bridging capital (diverse networks), providing access to information and resources (Phua et al., 2017). Given Nigeria's dynamic urban contexts, social media offers alternative spaces for network building amid limited traditional support.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing youth development challenges, including employment and civic participation (Nwankwor et al., 2024). This study explores social media usage and its influence on social capital among urban Nigerian youth using qualitative methods.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design to explore participants lived experiences, utilized in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) for rich, contextual data (Mantell et al., 2025).

### Population and Sampling

The target population comprised youths aged 18-35 residing in major urban areas of Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kano), selected for their high social media penetration and demographic diversity (Imoka, 2023). Inclusion criteria were: aged 18-35, active users of at least one of Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook (self-reported usage  $\geq 3$  times/week), and urban residency ( $\geq 6$  months). Exclusion criteria included non-English speakers (to ensure interview feasibility) and those without access to video conferencing for remote sessions.

Convenience sampling was used due to resource constraints and the exploratory nature of the study. Participants were recruited via social media advertisements (e.g., targeted posts on Instagram and Facebook groups for Nigerian youth), university networks, and community youth groups. This approach mitigated biases by diversifying recruitment channels beyond online-only methods, including in-person flyers at urban cafes and events. Potential biases from online recruitment (e.g., favoring tech-savvy individuals) were addressed by including offline recruitment and screening for varied education/employment levels.

Eight participants were recruited for IDIs, and seven for one FGD, totaling 15 participants. This sample size was justified by data saturation principles; no new themes emerged after the sixth IDI and during the FGD, aligning with guidelines for exploratory qualitative studies where 12-15 participants suffice for thematic saturation in homogeneous groups (Wutich et al., 2024). Saturation was assessed iteratively during analysis, with memos noting theme repetition.

### Participant Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes participant demographics, drawn from self-reported data during recruitment and interviews.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Identifier	Method	Age	Gender	City	Education Level	Employment Status
IDI-1	IDI	24	Male	Lagos	Undergraduate	Student
IDI-2	IDI	28	Female	Abuja	Postgraduate	Employed full-time
IDI-3	IDI	22	Male	Lagos	Vocational	Self-employed
IDI-4	IDI	30	Female	Port Harcourt	Undergraduate	Unemployed
IDI-5	IDI	25	Male	Kano	Postgraduate	Employed part-time
IDI-6	IDI	21	Female	Lagos	Secondary	Student
IDI-7	IDI	32	Male	Abuja	Undergraduate	Self-employed
IDI-8	IDI	27	Female	Lagos	Postgraduate	Employed full-time
FGD-1	FGD	23	Male	Lagos	Undergraduate	Student
FGD-2	FGD	26	Female	Abuja	Vocational	Employed part-time
FGD-3	FGD	29	Male	Port Harcourt	Postgraduate	Self-employed
FGD-4	FGD	20	Female	Kano	Secondary	Unemployed
FGD-5	FGD	31	Male	Lagos	Undergraduate	Employed full-time
FGD-6	FGD	24	Female	Abuja	Postgraduate	Student
FGD-7	FGD	33	Male	Lagos	Vocational	Self-employed

## Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed with open-ended questions on usage patterns, network building, trust, civic participation, and platform comparisons. IDIs lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted one-on-one (in-person or via Zoom) for depth. The FGD lasted 90 minutes, facilitating group dynamics and diverse perspectives (Kyambade & Namatovu, 2025). Sessions were audio-recorded with consent and conducted in English.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the British American Open University (BAOUC). Participants provided written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality of audio recordings and transcripts were ensured by using pseudonyms, storing data on password-protected devices, and limiting access to the research team. No incentives were provided, and debriefing was offered post-session to address any discomfort.

## Data Analysis

Transcripts were verbatim from recordings. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 25 (Seals, 2024). The first author coded transcripts, identifying initial codes and themes. The second author independently coded 50% of transcripts; consensus coding resolved discrepancies (>90% agreement). Validity was enhanced through triangulation (IDI vs. FGD data), member checking (summaries shared with three participants), and reflexivity (authors noted their Nigerian academic/youth backgrounds, mitigating bias via memos).

## RESULTS

Five themes emerged from the data, supported by verbatim quotes (with identifiers) and occurrence notes.

### Theme 1: Usage Patterns and Motivations

This theme examines how respondents incorporate Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook into their daily routines, highlighting both habitual usage patterns and the underlying motivations for engagement. Instagram emerged as the platform most frequently used, functioning as a “visual hub” for staying connected, discovering trends, and finding inspiration. Participants emphasized daily interaction:

“Instagram is where I stay updated on everything, from my friends’ lives to the latest fashion trends” (FGD participant 2, Female, 26). “It’s visually engaging, and I can easily connect with my friends and favorite influencers” (IDI, Male, Lagos, 24).

TikTok was primarily used for entertainment, humor, and creative expression. Users reported engaging with content during short breaks and for light-hearted amusement:

“I open TikTok when I just want quick entertainment or to laugh at something funny” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 21). “The algorithm knows me so well, it shows videos that match my mood or current interests” (FGD participant 1, Male, 23).

Facebook, while less frequently accessed, was valued for maintaining family ties and community connections:

“Facebook is where I catch up with family and local news, but I don’t post often” (IDI, Female, Abuja, 28). “It feels more grounded, like connecting with home and old friends” (FGD participant 3, Male, 29).

Age and routine influenced platform choice, with younger participants (18–25) favoring Instagram and TikTok, while older respondents (26–35) preferred Facebook:

“Morning is for Instagram inspiration, TikTok during lunch for fun, and Facebook at night for family updates” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 27).

## Theme 2: Network Building and Trust

Respondents described using social media to build relationships, sustain social ties, and develop trust. Instagram and Facebook were considered key tools for networking, whereas TikTok was more hobby-oriented:

“Instagram has been great for networking through mutual friends and events, while TikTok feels more anonymous, I connect with people who share my hobbies” (IDI, Male, Lagos, 27).

“Facebook helped me reconnect with old school friends and join local tech meetups” (IDI, Male, Abuja, 32). “We often chat on Facebook Messenger and share updates on Instagram; that keeps our friendship strong even though we’re in different cities” (FGD participant 6, Female, 24).

Trust in online interactions developed gradually and was strongest among familiar contacts:

“On Instagram, I trust acquaintances but stay cautious with strangers” (IDI, Female, Port Harcourt, 30).

“I trust people more on Facebook, especially in my community group, someone there even helped me find a reliable electrician” (FGD participant 7, Male, 33). “I’ve built trust with members of a Nigerian women-in-tech group on Facebook; we support and advise each other” (IDI, Female, Abuja, 28). “I met some friends on Instagram through a photo challenge; over time, we started sharing personal stories” (FGD participant 4, Female, 20).

## Theme 3: Civic Participation through Social Media

Participants reported using social media to engage with civic life, from staying informed to mobilizing for social causes. Instagram and Facebook were key sources of information, whereas TikTok provided immediate, engaging updates:

“I mostly rely on Instagram for breaking news or updates about social issues” (IDI, Male, Lagos, 24). “TikTok often shows me short clips of news that people are discussing, it feels more immediate, like news for my world right now” (FGD participant 1, Male, 23).

Respondents also described attending offline events discovered online:

“I attended a peaceful protest in Lagos after seeing posts shared by influencers I follow” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 21). “Last year, I joined a charity event in Abuja through a Facebook post, it felt great to actually do something” (IDI, Male, Abuja, 32). “I joined a climate change march after seeing Instagram posts about it, it made me feel part of something bigger” (FGD participant 2, Female, 26).

Social media was also used to mobilize others:

“I used Instagram to share mental health resources during a campaign, it felt meaningful” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 22). “I organized a small fundraiser for a local charity through Instagram stories; friends donated right away” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 27). “A cleanup event went viral after we shared it on TikTok, the turnout was much higher than expected” (FGD participant 1, Male, 23).

## Theme 4: Comparative Impact of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook

Respondents distinguished platforms by their interaction styles, trust levels, and community engagement. Instagram was associated with personal connection, TikTok with casual creativity, and Facebook with trusted, long-term relationships.

“Instagram feels more professional; I’m careful with what I post or say there because people judge based on visuals” (IDI, Male, Lagos, 22). “When I share photos of my daily life, people comment and message me, it feels like they actually know me better” (FGD Participant 2, Abuja). “Instagram is where I post about real things, not just memes. It helps people trust that I’m genuine” (IDI, Female, Port Harcourt, 30).

TikTok encouraged casual, playful engagement:

“TikTok is just for laughter and vibes; I don’t think anyone goes there to make real friends” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 28). “It’s more about creativity, I feel free to be myself without caring what people think” (FGD Participant 4, Kano). “You trust people’s content, not necessarily their personality” (IDI, Male, Abuja, 32).

Facebook reinforced familiarity and community:

“Facebook helps me keep in touch with family, it’s where people share serious things, not just trends” (FGD Participant 5, Lagos). “I still use Facebook groups to learn about jobs and church events. It’s more community-based” (IDI, Male, Port Harcourt, 30). “The groups feel safe; people talk about real issues like family and work” (FGD Participant 5, Lagos).

### **Theme 5: Overall Perception of Social Media’s Role**

Participants generally held positive views about social media’s influence, while acknowledging potential drawbacks.

“Social media has helped me stay connected with people, find new communities, and even discover opportunities I wouldn’t have known about otherwise” (IDI, Male, Lagos, 24).

“It has made it easier to stay in touch with people, find like-minded individuals, and stay connected to what’s going on in the world” (FGD Participant 6, Abuja). “Social media has definitely had a positive impact on my social life. It’s helped me stay connected with friends and family, expand my social circle, and stay informed about current events” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 21).

Participants also recognized the role of social media in promoting civic engagement:

“Social media has made me more aware of local events and causes that I can get involved in. It’s also helped me find volunteer opportunities and mobilize support for different causes in my community” (IDI, Male, Port Harcourt, 30). “Social media has made me more active. I feel more informed about local events and movements, and I’ve participated in things I wouldn’t have known about otherwise” (FGD Participant 2, Abuja). “Social media has made me more aware of social issues and has motivated me to take action, even if it’s just by sharing information or donating to a cause” (FGD Participant 3, Port Harcourt).

Respondents highlighted the importance of balancing online and offline engagement:

“I also recognize the importance of balancing online engagement with offline action and community involvement” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 21). “It’s easier to get involved now and share experiences with others, which encourages even more participation” (FGD Participant 5, Lagos).

Some participants noted potential downsides of social media:

“It can feel overwhelming at times, especially with the pressure to maintain an online image” (IDI, Male, Abuja, 32). “Social media is addictive and time-consuming; we need to use it mindfully” (FGD Participant 4, Kano). “I recognize the need to balance online interactions with real-life connections to avoid feeling isolated” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 27).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal nuanced patterns of social media use among Nigerian urban youth, demonstrating that Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook serve distinct yet complementary functions in shaping social connections, trust, and civic participation. Users engage with these platforms not merely for leisure but to cultivate social capital and navigate relational networks in ways that reflect both global digital practices and local cultural norms. Instagram emerged as a platform facilitating connection, inspiration, and relational intimacy. Its visual affordances enable users to present curated yet authentic self-images, supporting emotional

closeness and bonding social capital. As one participant noted, “Instagram is where I post about real things, not just memes. It helps people trust that I’m genuine” (IDI, Female, Lagos, 21). TikTok, by contrast, fosters entertainment, creativity, and algorithmically mediated engagement, encouraging bridging social capital through humor, trends, and shared interests, rather than deep personal relationships: “It’s more about creativity, I feel free to be myself without caring what people think” (FGD Participant 4, Kano). Facebook remains a critical site for trust-based, community-oriented engagement, particularly for maintaining family ties and local networks: “Facebook helps me keep in touch with family, it’s where people share serious things, not just trends” (FGD Participant 1, Lagos).

These patterns reflect both Uses and Gratifications Theory (Fronczak et al., 2022; Keuchenius et al., 2021) and social capital frameworks (Luoma-Aho, 2018), illustrating how Nigerian urban youth navigate bonding and bridging capital across platforms. Instagram and TikTok expand weak ties through shared interests, while Facebook reinforces close, trust-based relationships within familiar networks. Trust online is relational and contingent, developing over repeated interactions, collaboration, and community participation, supporting the notion of platforms as digital “trust incubators” (Gohil et al., 2024; Serres, 2023). Moreover, the immediacy of TikTok’s short-form content enhances emotional engagement and collective creativity, which can translate into offline participation in protests, charity events, and volunteer activities, highlighting the capacity of social media to bridge digital awareness with tangible civic action (Van Raemdonck et al., 2025).

Importantly, these findings extend existing scholarship by situating platform affordances within the cultural context of the Global South (Luoma-Aho, 2018). Unlike generalized studies of Western youth, Nigerian users attach significance to aesthetic presentation, familiarity, and respectability online. Instagram’s visuality supports both intimacy and reputation management, TikTok fosters playful yet transitory sociality, and Facebook maintains continuity within trust-laden, community-based networks (Liu et al., 2025). While social media is recognized as a vehicle for connectivity and civic engagement, participants also expressed caution regarding pressures of online identity, information overload, and digital stress, echoing Oyedemi & Choung, (2020). Collectively, these insights underscore that social media functions as a multi-dimensional ecosystem, simultaneously facilitating social bonding, bridging, trust formation, and civic participation among urban youth in Nigeria.

## IMPLICATIONS

For policymakers: Enforce anti-misinformation laws and promote digital access to bridge urban divides (Tsang & Zhou, 2025). NGOs/educators: Leverage Instagram for youth outreach (e.g., visual campaigns on mental health) and Facebook groups for employment bridging (e.g., job networks). Counter TikTok risks via literacy programs teaching critical evaluation to mitigate overload/cyberbullying (McCashin & Murphy, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Nigerian urban youth engage with Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook in distinct yet complementary ways, reflecting platform-specific affordances and cultural norms. Instagram primarily facilitates visual self-expression, relational intimacy, and bridging social capital; TikTok encourages entertainment, creativity, and trend-based connections; and Facebook supports trust-based, community-oriented networks and bonding social capital. Users navigate these platforms strategically throughout the day, fulfilling social, emotional, and informational needs while balancing online and offline engagement. Trust emerges as relational and cultivated through repeated interaction, collaboration, and shared experiences, illustrating how digital networks can strengthen both personal relationships and social cohesion.

Moreover, social media serves as a catalyst for civic participation, enabling awareness of local events, volunteering opportunities, and social causes, while also fostering a sense of belonging and collective action. Participants highlighted both the opportunities and challenges of platform use, including pressures of online identity, information overload, and digital stress, emphasizing the need for mindful engagement. Overall, the findings underscore that social media functions as a multi-dimensional ecosystem in which Nigerian youth simultaneously build social capital, maintain trust, express creativity, and contribute to civic life, offering critical insights into digital behavior in the Global South.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's small sample (n=15) limits depth, potentially missing nuances across strata; convenience sampling via social media may bias toward digitally literate participants, reducing representativeness. Urban-only focus excludes rural comparisons, where access differs (Fu et al., 2024). Selection bias from recruitment could overrepresent engaged users; qualitative design precludes causality, unable to isolate social media's effects from confounders. Future quantitative/mixed-methods studies could survey larger samples to test generalizability and causal links.

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