

**EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS:
A CASE OF MULTIMEDIA UNIVERSITY OF KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This study sought to establish the effect of social media use on romantic relationships among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya.

Problem Statement: Social media and online platforms have brought many benefits to young people. However, these platforms have also contributed to challenges in romantic relationships among university students. The fast expansion of social media use among university students in Kenya has coincided with a rise in relationship conflict and relational anxiety that sometimes result in tragic outcomes such as violence and even death.

Methodology: The study used mixed methods of research design to collect and analyze data. Structured questionnaires were used for quantitative data and interviews for qualitative data. The sample size was 374 respondents determined by Yamane formula, and two university counselors were interviewed for qualitative data. The respondents for this study were selected using stratified random sampling method.

Result: While social media platforms have improved communication between romantic partners, they have also increased relational conflict and relational anxiety among undergraduate students in romantic relationships. WhatsApp was the most used platform for communication by romantic partners among undergraduate students at the Multimedia University of Kenya. TikTok was the platform that was most closely associated with relational anxiety and relational conflict among undergraduate students.

Policy Recommendation: University management should adopt and implement policies that support mental health challenges related to social media use.

Keywords: *Social media use, romantic relationships, undergraduate students, communication, relational conflict, relational anxiety.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a form of mass communication that takes place on digital platforms while social media use refers to the action of engaging with these platforms to create, share, and exchange content in various forms like text, images, and videos (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Social media has changed how people interact online. People have moved from just sending messages to sharing everyday life updates. Online platforms allow users to communicate, stay connected with each other, and form new friendships (Bouffard et al., 2022).

Report from the Communications Authority of Kenya showed that social media is expanding quickly among Kenyan university students. Kenya has roughly 27.4 million internet users as of early 2025. This is about 48% of the country's total population. University students are among the highest users of the internet in the country. They rely on it for academic research, communication, and social interaction. (CA, 2025). Studies also indicate that social media addiction is becoming common among university students and it is affecting their academic performance and social well-being (Mwangi, 2023). Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are used for communication, entertainment, and building romantic relationships by university students (Njoroge, 2013). The content they consume from online platforms affects how they handle their relationships and important life decisions (Lee & Richards, 2016).

Before social media, young people would seek information and advice on romantic relationships through interpersonal networks, like family, community elders, religious institutions, and close friends. Parents and grandparents were important figures who guided the youth on marital expectations and values. They shared experiences and cultural norms through storytelling or advice. Community elders were the custodians of tradition and wisdom. They were also valuable sources of knowledge on relationships. They offered counsel on managing marital responsibilities and relational conflicts based on acceptable norms. (Cancian & Gordon, 1988). However, now, young people are being exposed to different viewpoints on marriage and relationships by content creators and blogs (Mutuku, 2018). This has led to unmet expectations, conflicts and disagreements in relationships (Mwangi, 2022).

A study by Rivas and colleagues (2021) looked at students in Spain and Latin America and found that about half of them had experienced harmful online behaviors within their romantic relationships. This included things like monitoring a partner's social media, sending hurtful messages, or sharing private information without consent. Such conflicts from online interactions can have a serious effect on the emotional well-being of students and the quality of their relationships. Leisring and Giumetti (2014) found that over 90% of college students in the United States had encountered some form of online aggression in their relationships. This

was manifested in ways such as excessive texting, threats, or coercion. This highlights the need for better awareness and support to help young people navigate relationships safely in the digital age.

Mwangi (2019), studied how social media influences the maintenance of romantic relationships among college students. He found that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook helped partners stay connected and express affection, but it also contributed to misunderstandings, jealousy, and mistrust. Kenya has witnessed a rise in violent cases linked to relationship conflicts among university students, with social media playing a critical role. (The Standard, 2017). Professor Lukoye Atwoli, a consultant psychiatrist and lecturer at Moi University's School of Medicine stated that while university life today seems easier compared to 20 years ago because of globalization, students now face challenges brought about by the digital information age. He explains that many current students are not well prepared for university life as they have grown up in environments that did not equip them for the social and emotional demands of campus life (The Standard, 2017). This is evident in the rise of violent and deadly relationship conflicts on campuses across Kenya. For instance, in recent years there have been tragic cases where romantic conflicts were fueled by social media interactions. Some led to murder or serious injury among university students. Experts blame this on factors such as peer pressure, poor emotional intelligence and the influence of social media, which tend to normalize unhealthy relationship behaviors (The Standard, 2017).

Multimedia University of Kenya has been one of the Universities that have been hit hard. One tragic case occurred on March 30, 2025, where Sylvia Kemunto, a first-year student, was murdered by a fellow student from conflicts that arose from online interactions (Daily Nation, 2025). Reports indicate that the suspect had been using social media to harass Sylvia prior to the incident. This shows how social media platforms can be misused to intimidate romantic partners, causing fatal consequences.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Social media and online platforms have brought many benefits to young people. However, these platforms have also contributed to challenges in romantic relationships among university students. Studies have shown that cyber dating abuse, online harassment, and violence have become common in romantic relationships. This has negatively impacted on students' emotional well-being and academic performance (Mwangi, 2019). The fast expansion of social media use among university students in Kenya has coincided with a rise in relationship conflict and emotional distress, sometimes culminating in tragic outcomes such as violence and even death (The Standard, 2024).

Social media can be used to perpetrate various forms of relationship abuse, including verbal threats, humiliation, and non-consensual sharing of private images. These behaviors not only damage trust and intimacy but can escalate into more severe violence, creating unsafe environments for students (Makama, 2015). If this trend continues, chances of losing undergraduate students to mental health issues due to relational conflicts and anxiety will be high. This will affect families and the entire community at large, as the youth are a vital sector of the country's productivity. This study therefore seeks to establish the effect of social media use on undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya, with the aim of raising awareness and creating targeted interventions that will safeguard the well-being and future potential of the youth.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To establish the effect of social media usage on romantic relationships among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultivation Theory

It was proposed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in the 1960s. It suggests that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of reality. In the context of this study, frequent exposure to social media can influence university students' expectations and beliefs about romantic relationships by presenting idealized or distorted portrayals (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Viewers, especially those who lack experience in a topic, are affected over time by the content they consume. Cultivation theory also argues that media exposure can shape the perception of reality among its viewers. For instance, when one keeps on viewing violence programs and images, it may cause them to overestimate the amount of violence prevalent in society. This study helps to illustrate how online content can create or reinforce certain beliefs and behaviors. This theory was used to explain how continuous exposure to online content can affect romantic relationships.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s explains the active role of audiences in selecting and using media to satisfy specific needs. This theory asserts that individuals are conscious, goal-oriented consumers who deliberately seek out media channels and content that will fulfill their personal, social, and psychological needs. (Katz et al., 1974).

A core tenet of UGT is that people use media to meet a wide range of needs. These needs are categorized into several types: Cognitive needs (seeking information, knowledge, and understanding), Affective needs (emotional or aesthetic experiences), Personal integrative needs (enhancing credibility, confidence, and status), Social integrative needs (strengthening connections with family, friends, and society) Tension release needs (escape and diversion from daily stress) (Katz et al., 1974). For example, university students may use social media platforms to keep up with news (cognitive) or share personal milestones (affective). UGT provides a framework for understanding why different people use the same media in different ways and for different reasons. This makes it relevant especially in the digital age, where users have control over their media choices.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Social Media Platforms

Recent studies show that social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram are used by a large part of the world's population. As of early 2025, about 64% of people worldwide use social media every day for around 2 hours and 20 minutes (Smart Insights, 2025). For example, a study at the University of Kabianga found that students mostly use WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram on their smartphones, often using more than one platform at the same time (SCIRP, 2020).

Research by Pew Research Center (2024) shows that among young people, platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp remain the most preferred social media sites in 2025. According to the Pew Research Center, YouTube leads with 90% of U.S. teens using it, followed by TikTok and Instagram, each used by about 60%, and WhatsApp at 55%. Facebook and Twitter (now X) have seen sharp declines in teen usage, with only 32% and 17% usage respectively (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Social Media Use and Romantic Relationships

A number of studies have been conducted on the influence of social media usage on marital and romantic relationships. A study by Banaag et al. (2014) investigated how media influences young people's perceptions toward love and their beliefs about romantic and realistic relationships. The study employed mixed methods, using both qualitative and quantitative methods like surveys or questionnaires to collect data. It was observed that when young people are exposed to media content, over time their perception and expectations of romantic relationships change. Social media was seen to have the potential to influence their expectations of romantic relationships. Although using self-reported data may have introduced bias.

Social media also causes both conflicts and connections, especially in marital relationships (Mwangi, 2022). In his research titled 'The influence of social media on the marital relationships of young middle-class couples in Nairobi, focusing on young middle-class couples in Nairobi. He found out that many young middle-class couples experienced both the positives and negatives of using social media in their relationship. He used a descriptive research design to collect data through surveys and interviews.

Using social media has the potential of shaping one's perceptions by exposing them to tailored content on relationships that can influence their attitudes and expectations. Kenya has one of the highest social media usage rates globally, with a huge portion of the population actively engaging in different social media platforms (Capital Business, 2024). The widespread use of social media in Kenya plays a key role in shaping perception, behaviors, and societal norms of university students (Waithaka, 2013). Social media also causes both conflicts and connections, especially in marital relationships (Mwangi, 2022). In his research titled 'The influence of social media on the marital relationships of young middle-class couples in Nairobi, focusing on young middle-class couples in Nairobi. He found out that many young middle-class couples experienced both the positives and negatives of using social media in their relationship. He used a descriptive research design to collect data through surveys and interviews.

Mwangi (2019), studied how social media influences the maintenance of romantic relationships among college students. He found that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook helped partners stay connected and express affection, but it also contributed to misunderstandings, jealousy, and mistrust. This is likely due to increased monitoring and online interactions. The study observed that social media can enhance communication, it also presents challenges to relationship stability. Njoroge (2013) explored the impact of social media on behavior change among university students in Nairobi. The study revealed that social media use significantly shapes the social interactions of students. Social media affects student behavior with both positive and negative outcomes, such as easier communication, and negative effects such as causing jealousy and anxiety (Njoroge, 2013).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic representation that show the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

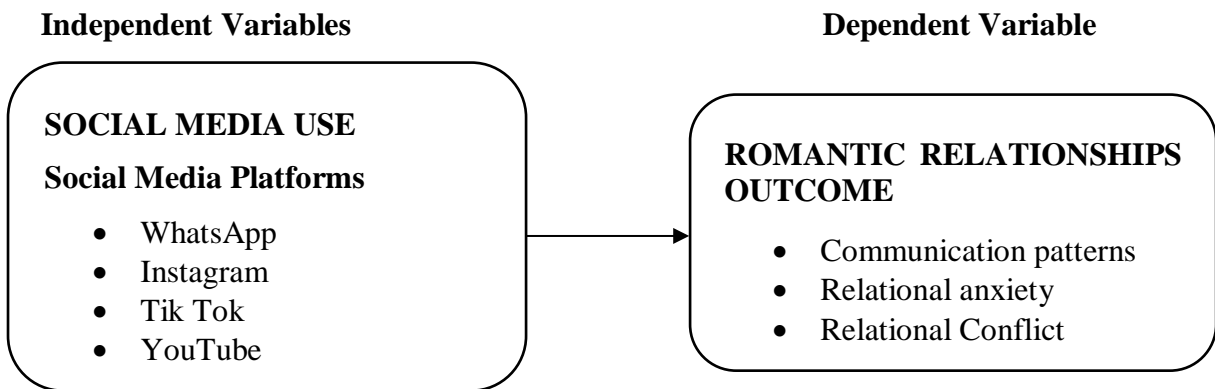


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how social media platforms, frequency of social media use, and the nature of content consumed affect romantic relationships among undergraduate students.

Under quantitative, a cross-sectional survey was conducted. This involved collecting data from a sample of undergraduate students at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For qualitative, the study used in-depth interviews on the Universities counsellors as they deal with most of the social issues affecting students. The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya, both male and female and university counsellors.

The researcher chose university students because they are learned and intellectually engaged, using social media platforms not only for social interaction but also as tools for academic purposes (Waithaka, 2013). The sampling frame for this study included 5,600 undergraduate students enrolled at Multimedia University of Kenya both male and female. The sampling frame was stratified by academic year to have a balanced representation. The sample size was approximately 374 students achieved using the Yamane formula.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis of Social Media Platform Usage and Romantic Relationships

This study used descriptive statistics to identify the most used platforms among the students and effect social media platforms had on students' romantic relationships.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Social Media Platforms and Romantic Relationships

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
I use WhatsApp regularly to communicate with my romantic partner	144 (50.8%)	92 (32.4%)	44 (15.3%)	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.5%)	4.32	.79
I use Instagram frequently to communicate with a romantic partner	44 (15.6%)	65 (23.0%)	100 (35.2%)	44 (15.3%)	31 (10.8%)	3.78	1.18
I often use YouTube to communicate with a romantic partner.	61 (21.4%)	97 (34.1%)	83 (29.4%)	33 (11.6%)	10 (3.5%)	3.58	1.06
I use TikTok to frequently communicate with a romantic partner	85 (30.1%)	94 (33.0%)	53 (18.7%)	34 (12.1%)	18 (6.1%)	3.23	1.21
Social media platforms have caused me conflicts in my romantic relationships	88 (31.1%)	86 (30.1%)	63 (22.2%)	28 (10.0%)	19 (6.6%)	4.09	1.19
Social media platforms are essential in my daily communication	72 (25.2%)	97 (34.0%)	75 (26.3%)	27 (9.5%)	14 (5.0%)	3.65	1.09
Social media platforms increase my feelings of anxiety in my relationship	57 (20.2%)	95 (33.5%)	71 (25.0%)	43 (15.2%)	17 (6.1%)	3.97	1.14
Weighted Average						3.723	1.077

The results in Table 1 depict that the statement that WhatsApp is regularly used to communicate with a romantic partner recorded the highest mean of (4.32) and standard deviation of (0.79). This indicates that respondents agreed that WhatsApp is the most used platform for communication with a romantic partner among undergraduate students. On whether Instagram is frequently used for communication among romantic partners, a mean of (3.78) and standard deviation of (1.18) was recorded. The relatively higher standard deviation on this statement shows that Instagram has a varied use among the respondents. YouTube recorded a mean of (3.58) and standard deviation of (1.06), suggesting that while several respondents use it within their romantic relationships, it is not as commonly used as WhatsApp. TikTok recorded the lowest mean of (3.23) and standard deviation of (1.21), suggesting that TikTok is not commonly used as a primary channel for communication among undergraduate students.

The results show that social media platforms have caused conflicts in romantic relationships. The results had a mean of (4.09) and standard deviation of (1.19), showing that a good number of respondents have experienced relational conflict arising from social media use. The statement on whether social media increases feelings of anxiety in relationships recorded a mean of (3.97) and standard deviation of (1.14), showing that most respondents agreed that using the various social media platforms has caused them to experience feelings of anxiety in their romantic relationships. The overall weighted mean of 3.723 with a standard deviation of 1.077 suggests that respondents generally agreed that social media platforms are commonly used by undergraduate students in their romantic relationships for communication but have also contributed to conflicts and feelings of anxiety. Since the weighted mean is above the Likert scale midpoint of 3.0.

Counsellor A noted,

“Most students use WhatsApp to communicate with each other as it is easy to use and budget friendly especially to students. They can make calls, send direct messages, post on their status, and see when their messages have been read. That convenience may be the reason why they prefer it over other platforms.”

Counsellor B also agreed that:

“WhatsApp has become the most used tool for daily communication among students in a romantic relationship.”

These findings are consistent with those of Wahyuti and Sudarmanti (2025), who found that WhatsApp is a dominant platform for romantic communication among university students which influences how partners express love, affection, and trust within their relationships.

Correlation Analysis between Social Media Platforms and Romantic Relationships

A Pearson correlation analysis was done to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between social media platform use and the three sub-variables of romantic relationships; communication, relational conflict, and relational anxiety among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya. As noted by Schober et al. (2018), Pearson's correlation coefficient measures the degree to which two variables are linearly related, with values ranging from -1 to $+1$, where -1 denotes a perfect negative relationship, 0 denotes the absence of any linear relationship, and $+1$ denotes a perfect positive relationship between the variables under study.

Table 2: Association between Social Media Platforms and Romantic Relationships

Social Media Platform	Communication	Relational Conflict	Relational Anxiety
WhatsApp	.370**	.212*	.127*
Instagram	.255**	.125*	.119*
YouTube	.173*	.122*	.018*
TikTok	.210*	.214**	.292**

Note. N=374

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings in table 2 showed that the use of WhatsApp was positively and significantly related to communication within romantic relationships ($r = .370, p < .05$). WhatsApp also showed a significant positive relationship with relational conflict ($r = .212, p < .05$) and relational anxiety ($r = .127, p < .05$). According to these findings, WhatsApp is seen to have the strongest link with communication among undergraduate students in relationships, likely because it facilitates real-time communication; however, as a result, it may also cause conflict and anxiety between partners.

Instagram use also showed a positive and significant relationship with communication ($r = .255, p < .05$), conflict ($r = .125, p < .05$), and anxiety ($r = .119, p < .05$) suggesting that Instagram also serves as a channel for communication but is also linked to slight increases in both relational conflict and anxiety. YouTube was positively and significantly related to communication ($r = .173, p < .05$), conflict ($r = .122, p > .05$) and anxiety ($r = .018, p > .05$).

Meaning that while YouTube may contribute to communication, relational anxiety and relational conflicts in romantic relationships of undergraduate students, its relationship is weak. TikTok showed a significant positive relationship with communication ($r = .210, p < .05$), weak with conflict ($r = .214, p < .01$), and positive with anxiety ($r = .292, p < .01$). Although most of the correlations were weak in strength, they were statistically significant at the .05 level, showing that a significant relationship exists between social media platforms and romantic relationships.

According to Counsellor A:

“Social media has helped students in relationships to be able to talk throughout the day, checking in on each other, share updates, and sorting out issues without having to meet physically. That has helped strengthen communication but at the same time create room for conflict and anxiety. For example, if someone sees their partner online and there’s no reply, or they are left on read, it quickly becomes an issue. So, the same platform that keeps them connected can also trigger misunderstandings.”

This finding aligns with Arikewuyo et al. (2021), who observed that social media platforms have allowed partners to stay connected and emotionally close despite physical distance.

Regression Analysis of Social Media Platforms and Romantic Relationships

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine how the four social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp) predict the three sub-variables of romantic relationships among undergraduate students. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3: Regression Results on Social Media Platforms and Romantic Relationships

Social Platform	Media Communication Patterns	Relational Conflict	Relational Anxiety
	Beta	beta	beta
TikTok Use	.14*	.18**	.24**
Instagram Use	.21**	.16*	.19**
YouTube Use	.11*	.08*	.04*
WhatsApp Use	.29**	.14*	.15*
R ²	.19	.11	.14
F	16.45	8.52	11.20
Sig. (p)	.000	.001	.000

Note. Standardized Coefficients (beta) are reported.

* Significant at $p < .05$.

** Significant at $p < .01$

Table 3 shows the regression analysis findings. On communication patterns, the model returned a statistically significant result ($F = 16.45, p = .000$), with the four platforms jointly accounting for 19% of the variance in communication patterns ($R^2 = .19$). Meaning that social media platforms explain 19% of the communication that occurs in romantic relationships among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya. WhatsApp recorded the strongest beta coefficient ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), followed by Instagram ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), TikTok ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), and YouTube ($\beta = .11, p < .05$). This suggests that WhatsApp and Instagram are the most used platforms by undergraduate students in communicating with their romantic partners.

On relational conflict, the model was significant ($F = 8.52, p = .001$), with the four platforms together accounting for 11% of the variance in relational conflict ($R^2 = .11$). TikTok posted the highest beta value for this dimension ($\beta = .18, p < .01$), with Instagram following at ($\beta = .16, p$

< .05), WhatsApp at ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), and YouTube at ($\beta = .08, p < .05$). The results therefore show that among the four platforms, TikTok use is most strongly associated with relational conflicts within romantic relationships among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya

On relational anxiety, the model was statistically significant ($F = 11.20, p = .000$), accounting for 14% of the variance in relational anxiety ($R^2 = .14$). TikTok again posted the highest beta value ($\beta = .24, p < .01$), followed by Instagram ($\beta = .19, p < .01$), WhatsApp ($\beta = .15, p < .05$), and YouTube ($\beta = .04, p < .05$). This pattern suggests that TikTok and Instagram use is more closely associated with anxiety experiences in romantic relationships than WhatsApp or YouTube among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya.

One of the counsellors noted that:

While social media platforms have become beneficial to students as they interact with their romantic partners, some become upset when their partner takes too long to reply to messages or when they notice certain activities online like posting other people. This creates tension and misunderstandings in relationships."

The regression results confirm that the use of social media platforms is significantly linked to romantic relationship outcomes specifically communication, relational anxiety and relational conflict among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya. These findings concur with those of Wrench et al. (2020), who established that the way individuals engage with social media has direct consequences on how romantic partners communicate, handle disagreements, and experience emotional strain within their relationships.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social media use significantly affects romantic relationships among undergraduate students at Multimedia University of Kenya, both positively and negatively. Social media platforms, particularly communication-oriented applications such as WhatsApp, have become central tools for maintaining romantic relationships by enabling continuous interaction, instant feedback, emotional connection, and accessibility between partners. However, they have also contributed to misunderstandings, relational anxiety, and relational conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that university Management should adopt approaches and policies that address mental health challenges that are related to social media use. These include strengthening counselling services to help students manage communication challenges, anxiety, and conflicts linked to social media use. They should also introduce digital literacy programs to guide students on healthy and responsible social media use in relationships. The study further recommends awareness campaigns on cyber dating abuse to educate students on online manipulation and unhealthy relationship behaviors. Finally, the study recommends that students should be encouraged to practice responsible social media use by limiting unhealthy digital habits, respecting boundaries online, and maintaining healthy offline interactions.

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