

Impact of Cell Phone Usage on Nigerian University Students: A Dual-Edged Sword

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Abstract

Cell phone usage among Nigerian university students has become a ubiquitous phenomenon, fundamentally altering the way students interact with their academic environment and social structures. While mobile phones offer unparalleled advantages, including access to information, improved communication and convenience, their usage also poses significant challenges. This paper is anchored on Uses and Gratification (U & G) theory propounded by Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail in 1969. It explores the dual-edged nature of cell phone usage among Nigerian university students, by investigating both the positive and negative implications. The paper advocates the need for a balanced approach to mobile phone usage among Nigerian university students. It was suggested, among other things, that Nigerian universities should implement policies that promote the positive use of mobile phones while mitigating their potential negative effects. University students who use their cell phones to access the internet connection need to pay more attention to the time they spend on the internet for relevant purposes rather than irrelevant activities.

Keywords: Cell Phones, Gratification, Students, Theory, University

Introduction

The proliferation of mobile phones has fundamentally altered society in the 21st century. Mobile phones have become a primary tool for communication, entertainment, and information (Pew Research Center, 2023). The widespread use of smartphones has led to significant advancements in several areas such as education, healthcare and business. For instance, mobile phones have provided greater access to information through the internet, facilitated remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and allowed businesses to expand their reach through digital marketing and e-commerce platforms. The impact of mobile phone usage on Nigerian university students cannot be fully understood without considering the specific context of Nigerian higher education. The socio-economic and technological landscape of

Nigeria plays a crucial role in shaping how students use mobile phones. With limited access to physical libraries and online learning resources in some parts of the country, mobile phones have become essential tools for bridging the digital divide (Chike-Okoli, Agbo & Okonkwo, 2015).

Cell phones have evolved from simple communication devices to complex tools that offer a broad spectrum of services. With access to the internet, educational apps, social media platforms, and various entertainment resources, smartphones provide Nigerian university students with a gateway to information and social connectivity. The use of mobile phones has become an integral part of students' academic lives, providing access to learning materials, enhancing communication with peers and lecturers and enabling participation in online discussions (Oluwatayo & Omoniyi, 2020). However, this rapid integration of mobile technology has sparked debates about the potential negative impacts, especially concerning distraction, addiction, and the erosion of face-to-face communication skills.

University students in Nigeria, like their counterparts globally, increasingly rely on their cell phones for various purposes, ranging from academic research to social networking, and entertainment (Adebayo & Olayemi, 2019). Research indicates that the average Nigerian student spends a substantial amount of time using mobile phones, which has raised concerns about the potential implications for academic performance, social interactions, and mental health (Ogunyemi & Okunade, 2020). Furthermore, the growing trend of using smartphones for academic purposes, such as accessing online educational resources, attending virtual classes and interacting with peers and instructors, has brought both positive and negative impacts on students' academic engagement (Sulaimon, 2018).

The academic use of cell phones among Nigerian university students is primarily seen in two areas: access to educational resources and communication with peers and lecturers. According to Adebowale (2016), mobile phones are frequently used by students for accessing e-books, academic journals, research materials and online courses. In an environment where physical libraries and educational resources can be limited, particularly in rural areas, mobile phones offer a practical and cost-effective alternative for students to enhance their learning experience. Mobile learning, facilitated through smartphones, has become an increasingly important tool in bridging the digital divide, providing Nigerian students with the opportunity to access a wealth of information at their fingertips (Alabi, 2017).

Furthermore, mobile phones facilitate communication, not just among students but also between students and academic staff. The use of platforms such as WhatsApp, email and social media for academic discussions, sharing class materials and addressing academic queries has become commonplace in Nigerian universities (Aderounmu & Olatunji, 2020). These communication tools allow for more fluid and immediate interactions. All these can enhance the learning experience and foster collaboration among students and educators.

Mobile phones seem have fundamentally altered social interactions among Nigerian university students. They serve as the primary means of communication, both within and outside of university contexts. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp are integral to students' social lives, allowing them to maintain connections with friends and family and engage in social networks that span across regional and international boundaries (Tella & Tella, 2017). For many Nigerian students, mobile phones enable them to share personal experiences, opinions and social updates.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilises Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory for its anchorage. The theory was propounded by Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail in 1969. It states that media exposure leads to certain behaviours, sometimes without a user's conscious control. The theory proposes that users or media consumers are actively choosing specific media content according to their needs. The five assumptions of the theory are: the goal of media use is direct; people are motivated to consume media; the selection of media is based on the expectation that it will satisfy specific needs and desire; and influence of media on the behaviour is being filtered through psychological and social factors. Others are: media itself is in competition with other forms of communication for an individual's attention; and people are in control of media thereby are not particularly influenced by it.

U & G theory emphasises that audiences are active participants/recipients of media messages. According to the theory, people use media to fulfill specific needs such as: informational needs, personal identity, social integration and entertainment. The theory also proposes that people have different levels of engagement and reasons for media consumption based on these needs. It encourages looking at media use as a way to understand audience behavior, rather than just focusing on what media messages do to people.

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory is relevant to this paper. It helps to explain why individuals choose particular media (in this case, cell phones) and how they use it to fulfill specific needs or desires. According to U&G theory, individuals are active participants in media consumption. They seek out media (including cell phones) to satisfy certain needs or desires such as information seeking, cognitive need for knowledge and academic growth, social interaction, entertainment and relaxation, personal identity and self-expression.

Impacts of Cell Phone Usage on Nigerian University Students

There are positive and negative impacts of cell phone usage on Nigerian university students. Mobile phones have revolutionised access to educational materials, enabling students to engage with resources beyond the traditional classroom setting. With the availability of various academic apps and platforms, students can access e-books, research papers, lecture notes and online courses at the click of a button. This has proven particularly valuable in Nigerian universities where the internet is becoming increasingly accessible but

where physical library resources might be limited or outdated. For instance, platforms like Google Scholar, YouTube educational channels and online journals provide students with access to a vast library of academic content.

In a country where many students face challenges like limited access to textbooks or libraries, mobile phones help bridge this gap, offering a wealth of knowledge right at their fingertips (Akinyele, 2019). Mahamud, Andrew and Rockson (2015) reported that (82%) of students at Wa Polytechnic, Ghana used mobile phones to support their course work. A study by Johnson and Radhakrishan (2017) found that the use of smart phones motivated the students to attend classes and participate in lectures. It also found that smart phones improve learning skills and help to complete assignments on time.

Mobile phones serve as an essential tool for communication among students, faculty, and family members. They allow for constant interaction, whether it be through voice calls, text messages or instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This is especially critical in a country like Nigeria, where students often come from different parts of the country and may have to stay away from their families for extended periods. Additionally, mobile phones allow students to stay in touch with academic staff and fellow students regarding coursework, assignments, and group discussions. A study by Akinwunmi (2021) shows that communication through mobile phones enhances students' ability to collaborate on academic projects, leading to better teamwork and academic success. Another study by Mojaye (2015) showed that use of mobile phone among college/university students has brought about a profound and diverse pool of knowledge. The study then concluded that mobile phones have positive effects on the educational and socio-economic development of Nigerian students

Mobile phones have become an essential tool in the academic life of Nigerian university students. The vast array of functionalities offered by modern smartphones, such as internet access, mobile apps, and instant communication tools, has made them indispensable for academic success. Students can easily access a wealth of educational resources, including online journals, lecture materials, and e-books, which significantly enhance learning opportunities (Olatoye & Durojaiye, 2017). Additionally, mobile phones facilitate communication between students and their lecturers or peers, fostering collaboration and the exchange of ideas.

One of the key advantages of mobile phone usage is its role in distance learning. In recent years, especially with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning became a necessity. In Nigeria, where access to traditional learning materials and infrastructures may be limited, mobile phones have served as a bridge for students to access virtual classrooms, webinars, and other e-learning platforms (Eze, 2020). This shift has made education more flexible and accessible, allowing students to participate in academic activities regardless of geographic constraints.

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Despite the many benefits, the pervasive use of mobile phones among Nigerian university students also carries significant disadvantages/negative impacts. The addictive nature of mobile phone usage can result in decreased face-to-face interactions and social isolation. As students become more engrossed in their online lives, they may neglect their relationships with peers and professors, leading to a decline in the quality of social interactions. This shift toward virtual interactions also limits students' ability to develop critical social skills, such as effective communication and conflict resolution, which are essential for both academic success and professional development.

There are also growing concerns about the mental health effects of mobile phone overuse. Studies have found that excessive use of mobile phones, particularly social media, can lead to anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances among university students (Rosen *et al.*, 2013). In the Nigerian context, where students face a range of socio-economic challenges, the constant pressure to be online and socially connected can exacerbate feelings of stress and insecurity. Moreover, the habit of checking mobile phones late at night can interfere with sleep patterns, leading to fatigue and reduced cognitive function, which in turn impacts academic performance.

Excessive use of mobile phones during lectures can lead to decreased attention and engagement, adversely affecting learning outcomes. While mobile phones offer academic benefits, their potential for distraction is significant. Social media and entertainment apps can be a source of distraction, leading to procrastination and time management issues. The constant presence of notifications from social media platforms, games, and entertainment apps can detract from students' focus on academic tasks. Excessive use of smartphones for non-academic purposes, such as social media engagement, gaming, and entertainment, has been shown to lead to decreased academic focus and productivity (Akinmoladun *et al.*, 2018).

Students often find themselves distracted by the constant notifications and the temptation to check social media platforms, leading to procrastination and poor time management. According to Okoro (2019), excessive use of mobile phones, particularly for non-academic purposes, can lead to distractions during lectures and study sessions. The

constant temptation to check social media or engage in online entertainment can detract from students' focus, negatively impacting their academic performance. This duality highlights the need for balanced and responsible usage to ensure that mobile phones are used as tools for academic enhancement rather than distractions.

A study by Adeyemi and Olusola (2020) found that Nigerian university students who spent excessive time on their phones for non-academic activities showed lower academic performance and poor time management skills. In Nigerian universities, where the education system is already facing challenges such as large class sizes, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient learning resources, the overuse of mobile phones exacerbates these issues by distracting students from their academic responsibilities. With notifications from social media and gaming apps, students can easily fall into a cycle of procrastination, neglecting their studies and thereby affecting their grades.

Excessive use of mobile phones has been linked to several mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances. For many Nigerian university students, the pressure to stay connected and maintain an active online presence on social media can result in stress and a feeling of inadequacy. The research conducted by Olamide and Eniola (2022) showed that Nigerian students who engaged heavily with social media platforms were more likely to report feelings of loneliness and anxiety. The addictive nature of social media, combined with a desire to seek validation through likes, comments, and shares, can negatively affect students' mental well-being, leading to a decrease in overall life satisfaction.

While mobile phones provide access to vast information, they can also foster academic dependency. Some students, rather than engaging in deep, critical thinking, rely heavily on quick internet searches for answers, avoiding independent learning. This culture of dependency can be detrimental to students' ability to develop problem-solving and analytical skills. Moreover, a study by Akinyele and Osagie (2021) found that many Nigerian students had developed a reliance on their mobile phones for academic purposes, such as taking notes or looking up answers during exams. This reliance can reduce students' cognitive abilities and limit their engagement in more meaningful academic activities.

The peer influence facilitated by social media is particularly prominent in Nigerian university culture. The constant interaction through mobile phones encourages the sharing of experiences, ideas and opinions, which can shape students' behaviours and attitudes. However, this influence is not always positive. As observed by Nwagwu (2015), social media platforms often create environments where students compare their lives, achievements, and experiences with others. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, peer pressure, and a distorted sense of self-worth. Furthermore, cyberbullying and online harassment, which are prevalent in online spaces, can negatively affect the mental health and emotional well-being of Nigerian university students.

The Need for a Balanced Approach to Mobile Phone Usage

Given the positive and negative consequences of mobile phone usage, it is essential for university students to adopt a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of these devices while minimizing their harmful effects. A balanced approach involves setting boundaries on the amount of time spent on mobile phones, prioritizing academic and personal goals, and developing healthier digital habits.

First, students should establish guidelines for phone usage during study times and lectures. Limiting phone use during these periods helps to reduce distractions and maintain focus on academic tasks. Many universities and academic institutions have begun to implement policies that encourage responsible mobile phone use such as designated phone-free zones during lectures or study sessions (Abubakar & Yusuff, 2020). Such measures can create an environment conducive to learning while allowing students to enjoy the benefits of mobile technology during their personal time.

Second, students should engage in regular self-reflection and awareness of how their phone usage affects their mental health. By recognizing the signs of social media fatigue or anxiety related to phone use, students can take proactive steps to manage their screen time and engage in offline activities that promote well-being. This can include setting aside time for physical activities, hobbies, or social interactions that do not involve digital devices. Encouraging students to disconnect from their phones periodically can help mitigate the negative mental health effects of constant connectivity.

Furthermore, universities should integrate digital literacy and wellness education into their curricula. This could involve teaching students about the responsible use of technology, including managing screen time, avoiding academic dishonesty facilitated by mobile phones, and fostering healthy online behaviors. By equipping students with the skills to navigate the digital world responsibly, universities can play a vital role in promoting a balanced approach to mobile phone usage (Alabi, 2017).

Given the dual nature of mobile phone usage, it is essential to adopt a balanced approach to its integration into student life. Institutions of higher learning should develop policies and strategies that encourage the responsible use of mobile phones while mitigating the risks associated with excessive usage (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019). This could include promoting digital literacy programmes that educate students on time management, online etiquette, and the potential mental health risks of mobile phone overuse. Additionally, universities could encourage students to engage in physical and social activities that promote face-to-face interactions and foster a sense of community.

Students, too, must take responsibility for their mobile phone usage, ensuring that they prioritize academic tasks and maintain a healthy balance between their online and

offline lives (Fuchs & Manzoni, 2021). Developing self-discipline and setting boundaries for mobile phone use, such as turning off notifications during study sessions or allocating specific times for recreational activities, can help mitigate the negative effects of mobile phone usage.

Conclusion

The pervasive use of mobile phones among university students presents both opportunities and challenges. While these devices provide valuable tools for learning, communication, and personal development, excessive or improper use can lead to distractions, mental health issues, and a decline in social well-being. Therefore, a balanced approach to mobile phone usage is necessary to ensure that students can reap the benefits of technology without falling victim to its potential harms. By setting boundaries, practicing self-awareness, and fostering digital literacy, students can manage their phone usage in a way that enhances their academic success and overall quality of life.

Suggestions

From the afore discussions the following have been suggested

1. Nigerian universities should implement policies that promote the positive use of mobile phones while mitigating their potential negative effects. Strategies may include integrating mobile technology into the curriculum, setting guidelines for appropriate usage, and providing support for students to manage their digital habits effectively.
2. University students who use their cell phones to access the Internet connection need to pay more attention to the time they spend on the Internet for relevant purposes rather than irrelevant activities.
3. Universities need to formulate and implement policies that restrict phone usage during lectures to prevent cheating and promote focused attention during lectures.
4. Nigerian universities have to offer seminars and workshops to educate students on the potential dangers of excessive mobile phone use, including its impact on academic performance and mental health. These initiatives could encourage students to develop healthy mobile phone usage habits and to seek a balance between their academic, social, and personal lives.

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