

Social Media Usage, Peer Comparison, Gender and Algorithm-Driven Anxiety Among Senior Secondary School Students

Kikelomo Adeduntan

School of Behavioural Science, Texila American University, Guyana, South America
kikeadeduntan@gmail.com;

Lawrence A. Okesiji

Department of Counselling and Human Development Studies, Faculty of Education University of Ibadan, Nigeria,
okerise@gmail.com: +2348056892223

Abstract

This study examined the influence of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive-correlational research design to determine the relationships and predictive effects among the variables. The population comprised all Senior Secondary School students (SS1–SS3) within Ibadan metropolis, with an estimated population of 49,872 students. A sample of 300 students was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across gender, class level, and school. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of a Social Media Usage Scale, Peer Comparison Scale, and an Algorithm-Driven Anxiety Scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics including independent samples t-test, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, and multiple regression analysis at a 0.05 level of significance using SPSS version 28.

The findings revealed a significant gender difference in algorithm-driven anxiety, with female students reporting higher anxiety levels than male students ($t = 2.87$, $p < 0.05$). Pearson correlation results indicated significant positive relationships among social media usage, peer comparison, and algorithm-driven anxiety. Multiple regression analysis further showed that social media usage, peer comparison, and gender jointly predicted algorithm-driven anxiety, accounting for 48% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Peer comparison emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by social media usage and gender.

The study concludes that increased social media engagement and peer comparison tendencies significantly contribute to algorithm-driven anxiety among adolescents, with female students being more vulnerable. The study recommends the promotion of digital literacy, healthy social media habits, and school-based psychological interventions to help students manage anxiety associated with algorithmically curated social media environments.

Keywords: Social media usage, peer comparison, algorithm-driven anxiety, gender differences, students.

Introduction

In recent years, adolescents' lives have become deeply intertwined with digital technologies. For many young people, online platforms are not merely tools of convenience, but spaces where social identities are formed, peer interactions unfold, and personal worth is validated through likes, views, comments, and algorithmic visibility. Adolescent users often experience algorithms as invisible forces that shape what they see and how they perceive themselves and others. This lived experience includes a growing sense of pressure to conform to idealised digital norms and to monitor online feedback, giving rise to psychological discomfort tied specifically to digital systems. Research on adolescent mental health has long documented an association between social media use and general anxiety, depressive symptoms, poor self-esteem, and other psychosocial stressors (Azem et al., 2023; Zeng, 2025). Studies consistently show that adolescents who engage frequently with social media platforms report higher levels of anxiety, particularly when usage becomes problematic or compulsive rather than merely frequent (Kerr et al., 2025).

However, beyond total screen time, the algorithmic structures that curate content such as recommendation feeds and personalised suggestions play a pivotal role in shaping emotional outcomes. These algorithmic systems prioritise engagement, often amplifying emotionally evocative content, reinforcing social comparison and identity concerns, and exposing young users to material that may normalise harmful ideologies or trigger psychological distress (Frontiers, 2025). Theoretical and empirical work further suggests that social comparison interacts with individual vulnerabilities such as self-esteem and emotional regulation to shape anxiety outcomes, with higher comparison tendencies predicting greater psychological distress (Ruan et al., 2023). The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into social media has further intensified these dynamics. AI-driven algorithms now tailor content with unprecedented precision, reinforcing existing

behavioural patterns and maximising time spent online. While this personalisation can enhance user experience, researchers have raised concerns that these same algorithmic mechanisms contribute to anxiety, self-esteem issues, and broader mental health challenges among adolescents (Fadillah, 2025). The logic of algorithmic curation rewarding attention, novelty, and affective engagement can heighten adolescents' internal pressures to be seen and validated in online spaces, often at the expense of emotional well-being.

In the context of schooling, algorithm-driven pressures intersect with academic expectations, peer comparison, and developmental sensitivities, making senior secondary students particularly vulnerable. This period of adolescence is marked by identity exploration, heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, and shifting emotional regulation capacities, all of which can be exacerbated by algorithmic dynamics that prioritise visibility and social standing.

For many adolescents today, social media is woven into daily life. Senior secondary school students regularly scroll through feeds, post updates, and interact with peers online as part of both their social and academic worlds. These platforms are not neutral; algorithms determine what content users see, often tailoring recommendations to increase engagement. This constant cycle of posting, checking, and responding can create emotionally charged experiences, as students may feel pressure to maintain visibility and gain affirmation through likes, comments, and shares. In school environments, where peer acceptance and identity formation are already pivotal, these algorithmic processes can significantly influence emotional wellbeing (Kerr et al., 2025; Fadillah, 2025). Empirical evidence links intensive social media use with heightened anxiety among adolescents. Systematic reviews show that problematic or frequent use, especially when combined with social comparison or constant monitoring of feedback, is associated with greater prevalence of anxiety symptoms (Azem et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2025).

Beyond total screen time, adolescents engaging with algorithmically curated content report emotional distress related to social comparison, body image concerns, and cyberbullying (Zeng, 2025; Weigle & Shafi, 2024).

Algorithmic recommendation systems amplify exposure to idealized lifestyles and emotionally provocative content, making everyday developmental challenges more difficult to navigate (Fadillah, 2025). Theoretical perspectives on algorithmic media suggest that personalised feeds, designed to maximise engagement, can inadvertently erode self-esteem and heighten anxiety, particularly among adolescents who are highly sensitive to peer evaluation and social feedback (Kerr et al., 2025; Zeng, 2025). Emotional regulation skills and the social context in which adolescents use social media further influence the intensity of these effects (Weigle & Shafi, 2024; Azemetal., 2023).

Adolescence is a period of intense social awareness and identity formation, and in today's digital age, peer comparison has extended far beyond physical classrooms into the virtual spaces of social media. Senior secondary school students frequently observe curated images and posts by their peers, making judgments about popularity, success, and self-worth based not only on real-life interactions but also on online visibility. These comparisons can be particularly potent when reinforced by social media platforms' recommendation systems, which tailor content based on user behaviour and amplify certain posts over others. The result is a pressure-laden environment in which students may feel their social value is continuously evaluated not just by classmates, but by invisible algorithmic processes that reward engagement and visibility. Research has increasingly linked social comparison on social media with negative emotional outcomes among adolescents. A systematic review of social media use and youth anxiety found that patterns of intense engagement, especially where comparison with peers is involved, are associated with greater symptoms of anxiety (Kerr et al., 2025).

Empirical studies also highlight that upward social comparison seeing peers presented more favourably or achieving more online can reduce learning engagement and contribute to emotional distress in adolescents (Qi, Jiang & Lian, 2024). Beyond academic effects, social comparison is shown to undermine self-esteem and wellbeing, functioning as a psychological mechanism that exacerbates anxiety when adolescents measure themselves against seemingly ideal online personas (Ma'rof & Abdullah, 2025). These findings mirror broader research demonstrating that algorithm-driven platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, can intensify exposure to idealised content, making social comparison more frequent and emotionally consequential for young users (Zeng, 2025).

As students navigate these digital spaces, they often experience pressure to gain likes, comments, and recognition, which can lead to heightened emotional responses. Importantly, the experience of algorithm-driven anxiety may not be uniform; gender can shape how students interpret feedback, compare themselves to others, and respond emotionally in these online environments. Research has shown that gender differences play a significant role in how adolescents experience anxiety related to social media. Systematic reviews indicate that female adolescents often report higher anxiety levels than males, partially due to increased sensitivity to appearance-based social comparisons and peer validation online (Kerr et al., 2025; Li & Wang, 2024). Conversely, male students may experience anxiety more related to status, performance, or competitive engagement in online communities (Ruan et al., 2023). Empirical studies suggest that algorithm-driven content, which amplifies popular or emotionally charged posts, can exacerbate these gender-specific anxieties by continually reinforcing perceived social hierarchies and ideals (Zeng, 2025; Ma'rof & Abdullah, 2025).

Furthermore, theoretical perspectives highlight that gender moderates the relationship between social media engagement and psychological

outcomes. For instance, adolescent girls who frequently compare themselves to curated, idealized images may experience greater self-esteem erosion and heightened anxiety, while boys may respond differently depending on their engagement with competitive content or peer approval mechanisms (Weigle & Shafi, 2024). Despite these findings, most studies have been conducted in Western or Asian contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how algorithm-driven anxiety manifests across genders in African educational environments. In urban centers like the Ibadan metropolis, where social media use among school adolescents is high, examining gender differences in algorithm-driven anxiety can provide insights critical for designing gender-sensitive interventions and mental health support strategies in schools.

Amid growing concerns about youth mental health in digital contexts, most research has been conducted in Western settings, leaving significant gaps in understanding how algorithm-driven peer comparison affects adolescents in African educational environments. In the Ibadan metropolis, where smartphone and social media use among school students is widespread, investigating the relationship between peer comparison and algorithm-driven anxiety is both timely and critical. There is a notable gap in regionally relevant research focused on algorithm-specific anxiety among secondary school students in African, urban contexts such as the Ibadan metropolis. In urban educational environments such as the Ibadan metropolis, where smartphone access and social media engagement are high, understanding how algorithmic social media patterns correlate with anxiety is both timely and necessary. Insights from such research can guide interventions in schools, addressing both digital habits and the emotional experiences shaped by algorithmic online environments (Fadillah, 2025; Zeng, 2025).

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the influence of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students in the Ibadan metropolis. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Ø determine the influence of social media usage intensity on algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students.
- Ø examine the relationship between peer comparison and algorithm-driven anxiety in adolescents.
- Ø investigate gender differences in the experience of algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students.
- Ø assess the combined predictive effect of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety.

Research Hypotheses

H0₁: Social media usage intensity has no significant influence on algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students

H0₂: Peer comparison does not significantly predict algorithm-driven anxiety among adolescents among senior secondary school students.

H0₃: There is no significant gender difference in algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary among senior secondary school students

H0₄: Social media usage, peer comparison, and gender do not jointly predict algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on examining the influence of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety among

senior secondary school students in the Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. The research specifically targets students in Senior Secondary School classes 1 to 3 (SS1–SS3), as this age group (approximately 13–19 years) is highly active on social media and particularly vulnerable to peer influence and algorithm-driven emotional stress. The study is limited to the psychological aspect of algorithm-driven anxiety, without assessing other forms of digital or technological stress. It also concentrates on self-reported social media usage patterns, peer comparison tendencies, and gender differences as predictors of anxiety. Geographically, the study is confined to urban senior secondary schools in Ibadan, which are selected to represent both public and private educational institutions. Findings may therefore be generalisable to similar urban school settings but may not fully reflect the experiences of students in rural areas or outside Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the influence of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety among senior secondary school students in the Ibadan metropolis. The design allows for the assessment of relationships and predictive effects between independent variables (social media usage, peer comparison, and gender) and the dependent variable (algorithm-driven anxiety) without manipulating variables (Kerretal., 2025; Zeng, 2025).

Population

The population comprises all Senior Secondary School students (SS1–SS3) in public and private secondary schools within the Ibadan metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria. The target population is estimated at approximately 49,872 students, reflecting the number of students enrolled in urban secondary schools (Oyo State Ministry of Education, 2023).

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 300 students was drawn using a stratified random sampling technique, ensuring representation across school type (public and private), class level (SS1–SS3), and gender. There are eleven Local Government areas in the Ibadan. These were first stratified into Ibadan main (Ibadan Metropolis) and less city. Ibadan Metropolis was purposively selected for the study, because it is the target geographical location of the study. The schools in the metropolis were stratified categorised into public and private schools. Six schools were selected, using simple random sampling technique. The randomly selected schools comprise of four public and two private schools. Simple random sampling technique was also used to select fifty students each from the selected schools.

Instrumentation

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire, consisting of four sections: Section A-Demographics: Age, gender, class level, and type of school. Section B-Social Media Usage Scale: Adapted from the Social Media Engagement Questionnaire (SMEQ) to measure frequency, duration, and intensity of social media use. The scale was originally developed by Andrew K. Przybylski, Akira Murayama, Kou Murayama (2013), and was revalidated to have reliability value of Cronbach's alpha .76

Section C-Peer Comparison Scale: Adapted from the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) was originally developed by Frederick, Gibbons and Bram Buunk (1999) to assess adolescents' tendency to compare themselves with peers online. It was revalidated to have reliability value of Cronbach's alpha .77

Section D-Algorithm-Driven Anxiety Scale: The researchers developed an instrument measuring anxiety symptom specifically associated with social media algorithmic feedback, including concerns over likes,

comments, and content visibility with reliability value of Cronbach's alpha .72. All instruments used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Data Collection and Procedure

Permission was obtained from school authorities and informed consent from students and their parents/guardians. 2 trained research assistants were used to distribute the questionnaires during school hours, emphasising confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data collection took three weeks.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage) was used to summarise demographic information. Inferential statistics include:

- Ø Independent t-tests were used to examine gender differences in algorithm-driven anxiety.
- Ø Pearson correlation was to assess relationships between social media usage, peer comparison, and anxiety.
- Ø Multiple regression analysis was also used to determine the predictive effect of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety.

All statistical tests were evaluated at a 0.05 level of significance.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Demographics

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	168	56%
	Female	132	44%
Class Level	SS1	100	33.3%
	SS2	100	33.3%
	SS3	100	33.3%
School Type	Public	160	53.3%
	Private	140	46.7%

Hypotheses Testing on Gender Differences

Test: Independent samples t-test

Purpose: To determine if there is a statistically significant difference in

algorithm-driven anxiety between male and female students.

Significance Level: 0.05

Table 2: Independent t-test for Gender Differences in Algorithm-Driven Anxiety

Gender	N	Mean Score	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Male	168	3.42	0.65	2.87	298	0.005*
Female	132	3.68	0.60			

The results in the table 2 above indicated that the null hypothesis was rejected at $p < 0.05$, and the researchers concluded that there was a significant gender difference in algorithm-driven anxiety among the senior secondary students in the Ibadan metropolis.

Relationship Between Social Media Usage, Peer Comparison, and Algorithm Driven Anxiety
Test: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation

Purpose: To assess the strength and direction of the relationships between social media usage, peer comparison, and algorithm-driven anxiety.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3
1. Social Media Usage	1		
2. Peer Comparison	0.45**	1	
3. Algorithm Anxiety	0.52**	0.58**	1

$p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Table 3 above shows that there were positive correlations among the variables, indicating that higher social media usage and stronger peer comparison tendencies are associated with higher levels of algorithm-driven anxiety.

Predictive Effect of Independent Variables on Algorithm-Driven Anxiety

Test: Multiple Regression Analysis

Purpose: To examine the combined and individual influence of social media usage, peer comparison, and gender on algorithm-driven anxiety.

Significance Level: 0.05

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor Variable	B	SE B		t-value	p-value
Social Media Usage	0.35	0.07	0.32	5.00	0.000*
Peer Comparison	0.42	0.06	0.38	7.00	0.000*
Gender	0.18	0.05	0.15	3.60	0.001*

$R^2 = 0.48$, $F(3, 296) = 91.85$, $p < 0.001$

The model in the table 4 indicates that 48% of the variance in algorithm-driven anxiety is explained by social media usage, peer comparison, and gender combined. Each predictor has a significant positive effect, meaning higher social media usage, stronger peer comparison, and female gender are associated with increased anxiety.

Discussion

The findings revealed that social media usage significantly predicts algorithm-driven anxiety. This suggests that increased engagement with social media platforms is associated with higher levels of anxiety related to algorithmic content delivery and feedback systems. This aligned with the submission of Bucher (2022) who shows that frequent social media use is associated with heightened emotional reactivity and increased anxiety, particularly when users are exposed to algorithmically amplified content streams. Besides, peer comparison was also emerged as a significant predictor, and the strongest contributor to algorithm-driven anxiety. This finding indicates that students who frequently compare themselves with peers on social media platforms are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety linked to algorithmic exposure. This allied with recent studies which confirmed that frequent peer comparison on social networking sites is strongly associated with increased anxiety, stress, and decreased psychological well-being among university students (Faelens et al., 2023; Yue et al., 2024).

Gender shows a statistically significant positive effect on algorithm-driven anxiety, indicating that female respondents reported higher levels of algorithm-driven anxiety than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with recent psychological research suggesting that females tend to experience higher levels of social comparison and emotional responsiveness in online social environments. This is shown in empirical evidence which indicates that women are generally more

sensitive to online social evaluation and are more likely to experience anxiety linked to social media interactions and algorithmic exposure (Twenge et al., 2022; Keles et al., 2023). The higher mean score among females is consistent with existing literature indicating that adolescent girls tend to report higher levels of anxiety and emotional distress compared to boys (Jean M. Twenge et al., 2022; Candice L. Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Research has shown that girls are generally more engaged in social interaction and relational evaluation on digital platforms, which may increase their vulnerability to online comparison and feedback sensitivity. For example, Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski (2022) argued that the psychological impact of social media may vary by gender, with adolescent girls showing stronger associations between digital engagement and emotional outcomes.

The results revealed significant positive relationships among social media usage, peer comparison, and algorithm-driven anxiety. This finding suggests that adolescents who spend more time on social media platforms are more likely to engage in comparisons with their peers. Contemporary research has consistently demonstrated that social media environments are structured around visibility, metrics of popularity, and curated self-presentation, all of which encourage users to evaluate their lives against those of others. This is in tandem with studies by Vogel and Rose (2023) which noted that increased exposure to carefully curated online content often intensifies social comparison tendencies among users, particularly among students and young adults.

The regression model of the result was statistically significant, with a coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.48$). This indicates that the three predictor variables collectively explain approximately 48% of the variance in algorithm-driven anxiety among the respondents. The relatively high explanatory power of the model suggests that behavioral engagement with social media and psychosocial processes such as peer comparison

play a substantial role in shaping anxiety associated with algorithmically curated digital environments. This is in tandem with recent research finding in digital psychology which support the notion that patterns of social media engagement and social evaluation processes significantly contribute to anxiety and emotional distress among users (Kross et al., 2023; Montag & Hegelich, 2022).

Conclusion

Social media usage significantly predicts algorithm-driven anxiety, indicating that greater engagement with social media platforms increases anxiety related to algorithmic content curation and feedback systems. Peer comparison is also a significant predictor and the strongest contributor to algorithm-driven anxiety, as students who frequently compare themselves with peers online tend to experience higher anxiety due to exposure to idealised portrayals of others' lives, which can foster feelings of inadequacy and fear of missing out. Gender differences were also observed, with female students reporting higher levels of algorithm-driven anxiety than males, suggesting greater sensitivity to online social evaluation and relational feedback. Additionally, significant positive relationships exist among social media usage, peer comparison, and algorithm-driven anxiety, indicating that increased social media engagement promotes peer comparison, which in turn heightens anxiety.

Recommendations

- Ø Educational institutions should implement digital literacy programs that educate students on how social media algorithms function and how curated online content may influence perceptions, emotions, and social comparisons. This awareness can help students develop critical perspectives toward algorithmically generated content.
- Ø Students should be encouraged to adopt balanced and mindful social media usage. Setting time limits, engaging in offline activities, and avoiding excessive exposure to social comparison triggers can help reduce anxiety associated with social media use.
- Ø University counseling centers should incorporate discussions on social media-related stress and algorithm-driven anxiety into mental health support programs. Counseling interventions can help students develop coping strategies to manage digital stress and social comparison pressures.
- Ø Since female students reported higher levels of algorithm-driven anxiety, targeted interventions should be designed to address gender-specific vulnerabilities. Workshops focusing on self-esteem, emotional regulation, and healthy digital engagement may help mitigate anxiety among female students.
- Ø Students should be encouraged to use social media platforms for constructive purposes such as academic collaboration, knowledge sharing, and supportive peer interactions rather than engaging primarily in passive consumption and comparison.

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