

Contextualizing gendered social media practices in African higher education: The case of UBIDS, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid growth of social media (SM) use in higher education, there remains limited context-specific evidence on how institutional environments shape gendered SM practices. Existing studies are further constrained by methodological limitations and inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in SM usage. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), this study examined gender differences in SM platform preferences and usage patterns among undergraduates at the University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS), Ghana. The study adopted a pragmatist philosophy and employed a convergent concurrent mixed-methods design to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. A sample of 365 undergraduate students was selected using multi-stage sampling, comprising stratified random and proportionate sampling techniques, while purposive sampling was used to select qualitative participants. Data were collected through a survey, three focus group discussions (FGDs), and twelve key informant interviews (KIIs). Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25 and summarised using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, while qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that Facebook, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) were more commonly preferred by male students, whereas TikTok and Snapchat were more popular among female students. Male students primarily used SM for socialisation and information seeking, while female students were more likely to use SM for entertainment and creative expression. The study concludes that gender differences in SM platform preferences and purposes of use exist among UBIDS undergraduates, but these differences are contextually shaped by user motivations, technological affordances, institutional environments, peer influence, and socio-cultural expectations rather than by gender alone. The study recommends that UBIDS strengthen digital literacy and digital wellbeing programmes and strategically integrate widely used SM platforms into teaching, learning, and professional development while ensuring equitable and non-stereotypical digital engagement.

Keywords: Gendered Social Media Practices; Gender Differences; Higher Education; Ghana, Social Media Usage, UBIDS

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is characterised by an unprecedented information explosion facilitated by the internet and diverse communication technologies. The rapid growth of the internet has facilitated the rise of social media (SM) platforms, enabling billions of individuals worldwide to connect, share ideas, communicate, and engage in various activities, irrespective of geographical boundaries (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Asare-Donkoh, 2018; Mangden & Diyoshak, 2023; Mushimiyimana et al., 2026). According to Kemp (2024) and Statista (2024), as of October 2024, approximately 5.52 billion active internet users were recorded globally, representing 67.5% of the global population. However, significant gender disparities persist in internet usage; 65% of women used the internet compared to 70% of men (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2024; Statista, 2024). In the Global South (GS), internet adoption rates exhibit notable regional variations, reflecting the diverse socio-economic and infrastructural contexts. For instance, West Africa and Eastern Africa have relatively high internet user percentages compared to Central Africa and Central Asia, underscoring disparities in digital accessibility (Kemp, 2023).

Africa has witnessed rapid growth in internet usage, projected to reach 667 million users by 2024 (Statista, 2022). However, the continent continues to grapple with a widening digital gender divide, with women 14% less likely to own mobile phones and access the internet than men (Mazibuko, 2023). In 2022, 46% of men in Africa used the internet compared to only 34% of women (GSMA, 2023). Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, remains among the regions with the most pronounced gender gaps in digital usage. Gender disparity in internet usage is bigger in the Arab States

and Africa, with around a ten percent difference (Statista, 2024). In Ghana, internet penetration reached 68.2% in early 2023, with 23.05 million active internet users. Despite the growth in internet adoption among both genders, men consistently outpace women, with usage rates of 72% for men versus 65% for women in 2021 (Dabalen & Mensah, 2023). These gender disparities in internet and SM usage are often linked to broader socio-cultural and economic inequalities that shape digital access and participation in many GS societies. Existing studies attribute the digital gender divide to factors such as patriarchal social structures, unequal access to digital devices, lower levels of digital literacy among women, affordability constraints, and culturally embedded expectations regarding women's engagement with technology (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014; Acilar & Sæbø, 2023). In many African contexts, women may experience restricted access to digital resources and online spaces due to gendered norms that influence technology ownership, patterns of interaction, and online visibility. Consequently, gender differences in SM use are not merely technological issues but are deeply embedded in wider social and cultural systems.

SM has become integral to digital interaction, with 5.22 billion active users worldwide, constituting 63.8% of the global population as of October 2024 (Kemp, 2024; Statista, 2024). Gender disparities also persist in SM use, with men accounting for 53.7% of users globally, compared to 46.3% for women (Kemp, 2024). Similar disparities are evident across Africa where recent estimates indicate that women account for approximately 43–45% of SM users across the continent, compared with 55–57% for men, reflecting a continuing digital gender gap (Kemp, 2024; GSMA, 2026). SM usage in Ghana continues to expand rapidly. As of January 2024, the country recorded approximately 7.4 million active SM users, representing 21.5% of the total population. Notably, gender disparities in SM usage are evident in Ghana, with men accounting for 58.8% of users compared to 41.2% for women (Kemp, 2024). These disparities reflect more than unequal access to digital technologies; they are shaped by broader structural and socio-cultural inequalities that influence individuals' opportunities to participate in digital environments. Studies suggest that differences in affordability of internet-enabled devices, digital literacy, educational attainment, online safety concerns, and prevailing gender norms continue to constrain women's digital participation, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2023; Singh et. al., 2025; GSMA, 2026). In many GS contexts, patriarchal social structures, unequal control over household resources, and restrictive socio-cultural expectations further limit women's access to and engagement with digital platforms, thereby reinforcing existing gender inequalities in online participation (Bhatt et al., 2024; Singh et. al., 2025; Chilunjika, & Ngulube, 2026). Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, and TikTok dominate the SM landscape, with Facebook leading at approximately 3.0 billion monthly active users as of October 2024 (Kemp, 2024). In the GS, the expansion of affordable smartphones and mobile broadband infrastructure has significantly accelerated SM adoption. Notably, nine of the ten countries with the highest Facebook user populations are located in the GS (Schroeder et al., 2023). However, this growth has not translated into equitable digital participation, as disparities in digital access, affordability, digital skills, and socio-cultural constraints continue to shape how different social groups, particularly women, access and use SM (Singh et. al., 2025).

Globally, SM has transformed how tertiary students interact, communicate, and access academic resources. University students consistently rank among the most active SM users (Chawinga, 2017; Athukorala, 2018; Alamri et al., 2020; Odoom et al., 2025; Issah, 2025). Platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, among others facilitate collaborative learning, academic discussions, resource sharing, peer support, and communication between students and instructors (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Bawa et al., 2021; Issah, 2025). Within the GS, research indicates that gender disparities persist in the types of platforms used, motivations for use, levels of engagement, and patterns of addiction among tertiary students (Khan, 2012; Azizi et al., 2019; Hossain & Prodhan, 2020; Mo et al., 2020; Weissman, 2021; Muasa & Maina, 2025). For instance, Hossain and Prodhan (2020) and Muasa and Maina (2025) observed that male university students were more inclined to use SM platforms for information seeking and opinion sharing, whereas female students preferred entertainment, educational content, and maintaining social connections.

Empirical studies in Ghana further suggest differences in patterns of SM use. For example, Ameyaw et al. (2017) report that men tend to use SM primarily for academic purposes, whereas women are more inclined toward downloading and engaging with multimedia content. Asante (2024) found that males preferred Facebook and X, whereas females favoured Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok. However, findings remain inconclusive, as other studies have reported no statistically significant gender differences in usage patterns (Dzandu et al., 2016; Annan-Brew & Nartey, 2021). Existing Ghanaian studies have largely concentrated on universities in the southern part of the country and have reported inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between gender and SM use (Dzandu et al., 2016; Annan-Brew & Nartey, 2021; Ameyaw et al., 2017). These inconsistencies highlight the need for further context-specific studies. Also, there remains limited empirical evidence on how gender shapes SM usage patterns in tertiary institutions within northern Ghana. Little is known about how contextual factors such as socio-cultural norms, digital accessibility, and institutional environments influence gendered SM practices among students in northern-based universities such as the University of Business and Integrated Development Studies (UBIDS).

Within UBIDS, SM usage among students has grown considerably. Located in northern Ghana, UBIDS operates within a socio-cultural environment that differs in several respects from many tertiary institutions in southern Ghana.

Northern Ghana has historically experienced relatively lower levels of infrastructural development, digital access, and socio-economic advancement compared to the southern regions of the country. Additionally, cultural and gender norms within some communities may shape students' access to technology, online participation, and communication behaviours. Despite these contextual realities, improvements in campus-wide internet infrastructure managed by the Directorate of Information Management Services (DIMS), together with mobile internet services provided by MTN, Telecel, and Airtel-Tigo (AT), have expanded opportunities for students to engage with SM for both academic and social purposes. These developments make UBIDS an important context for examining how gender intersects with SM practices within a developing higher educational environment.

1.1 Research Objective

- i. Investigate gender differences in SM platform preferences among tertiary students at UBIDS.
- ii. Examine gender differences in patterns of SM usage among tertiary students at UBIDS.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding gendered SM practices among tertiary students. UGT explains the motivational drivers underlying SM use by focusing on the gratifications individuals seek from media engagement, while UTAUT explains the technological, social, and institutional factors influencing technology acceptance and usage behaviour.

2.1.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The UGT, introduced by Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch in 1974, focuses on understanding why individuals select specific media and the benefits derived from their use. Unlike traditional media theories that emphasize the influence of media on individuals, UGT adopts an audience-centered perspective, prioritizing what people actively do with media (Katz et al., 1974; McQuail, 2010). The theory identifies five key categories of needs fulfilled by media: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and escape/diversion needs. SM platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp exemplify how users can actively seek content that aligns with their individual needs, facilitating a highly personalised and interactive media experience (Musa et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2017; Issah, 2025).

In the context of SM, UGT emphasises that users actively and intentionally engage with platforms to satisfy particular needs such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, academic collaboration, and self-expression. Unlike traditional media audiences, SM users are both consumers and producers of content, allowing for greater interactivity and personalised engagement (Grover et al., 2022). This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding gendered SM practices among tertiary students, as male and female students may seek different forms of gratification based on their social experiences, interests, and cultural expectations. For instance, some users may prioritise academic networking and information sharing, while others may focus more on social connectivity and entertainment. Thus, UGT provides a useful framework for explaining how differing motivations influence patterns of SM engagement among tertiary students.

2.1.2 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

The UTAUT, proposed by Venkatesh and colleagues in 2003, synthesises constructs from eight foundational theories of technology acceptance. This integrative model emphasises the role of four core constructs (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions) in shaping individuals' behavioral intentions and actual usage of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Performance Expectancy: Defined as the extent to which individuals believe that using a system will enhance their performance, this construct is pivotal in predicting technology adoption. Tertiary students, for example, may perceive SM as instrumental in improving academic collaboration or accessing educational resources (Zhou et al., 2010). Effort Expectancy: This refers to the ease of use associated with a technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Gupta et al., 2008). For students, the simplicity and user-friendliness of platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, and others could influence their willingness to adopt them for academic or social purposes. Social Influence: The degree to which individuals perceive that significant others expect them to use a technology is another critical factor (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Among students, peer and gender norms and societal expectations may significantly impact the choice and usage patterns of SM.

Facilitating Conditions: It refers to the extent to which individuals believe that the organisational, technical, and infrastructural resources necessary to support the use of a technology are available (Venkatesh et al., 2003). These conditions exert a direct influence on actual technology use by reducing barriers to adoption and enhancing users' ability

to engage with digital platforms effectively. Within tertiary education, facilitating conditions include reliable internet connectivity, access to internet-enabled devices, technical support, institutional digital policies, and opportunities for developing digital competencies. In the context of UBIDS, facilitating conditions are reflected in the availability of campus-wide wired and wireless internet services provided by the DIMS, complemented by mobile broadband services offered by telecommunications providers such as MTN, Telecel, and AirtelTigo. These digital infrastructures enable students to access SM platforms for academic collaboration, information sharing, communication, and social interaction both on and off campus. However, the availability of infrastructure alone does not necessarily guarantee equitable usage. Students' ability to benefit from these facilitating conditions may vary according to factors such as affordability of internet-enabled devices and data bundles, digital literacy, and prevailing socio-cultural expectations that shape technology use. Thus, facilitating conditions within the UBIDS environment provide an important contextual lens for understanding how institutional support and access to digital resources may influence gendered patterns of SM usage.

Within the UTAUT framework, gender is considered a key moderating variable that shapes how individuals perceive and respond to technological systems (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2016). In this study, gender is conceptualised not merely as a biological category, but as a socio-cultural factor that shapes access, motivations, interaction patterns, and engagement with digital technologies. Thus, gender operates as a moderating variable influencing both the gratifications sought from SM and the factors affecting technology adoption and use among undergraduate students. In many GS contexts, including Ghana, gender norms may shape digital participation by influencing access to devices, confidence in technology use, patterns of online interaction, and acceptable forms of social engagement. These socio-cultural dynamics can affect how male and female students perceive, adopt, and utilise SM for academic, informational, and social purposes. Thus, examining SM usage through a gendered lens enables a deeper understanding of how social and institutional contexts influence digital behaviour within higher education environments.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Gendered SM Platform Preferences

Existing empirical evidence suggests that although men and women often use multiple SM platforms simultaneously, they tend to show varying preferences for particular platforms. However, these preferences are better understood as context-specific tendencies shaped by users' motivations, technological affordances, peer influence, and socio-cultural settings rather than as fixed male and female characteristics. Studies across higher education increasingly show that the rapid expansion of affordable smartphones and mobile internet has encouraged widespread use of SM platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, X, Instagram, TikTok among others for both academic and social purposes (Chawinga, 2017; Ogundele, 2023; Issah, 2025; Mushimiyimana et al., 2026). However, differences in digital access, socio-cultural expectations, and institutional support continue to shape how students engage with SM platforms (UNESCO, 2023; Singh et. al., 2025; Chilunjika, & Ngulube, 2026).

Several studies report that male students are more likely to prefer platforms such as Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) that facilitate information exchange, public discourse, and professional networking. For example, Hossain and Prodhan (2020) found that male university students in Bangladesh used Facebook primarily for video viewing, opinion sharing, and news consumption. Similarly, Asante (2024) reported that male students in Ghana showed stronger preferences for Facebook, WhatsApp, and X, platforms commonly associated with information seeking, political discussions, sports, and academic communication. Comparable patterns have also been observed in other studies from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, where men generally demonstrate greater engagement with platforms such as Facebook, X and YouTube which support informational and instrumental activities (Balfaqeeh, 2017; Alnjadat et al., 2019; Ogundele et al., 2023; Wang & Lin, 2024). Conversely, several studies indicate that female students more frequently prefer visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which facilitate creative expression, relationship maintenance, and interactive communication (Baker et al., 2019; Weissman, 2021; Asante, 2024; Muasa & Maina, 2025). For instance, Baker et al. (2019) found that Instagram plays an important role in identity construction and peer engagement among female college students. Similarly, Weissman (2021) revealed the increasing popularity of TikTok among female university students, highlighting its appeal for entertainment, creative content production, and social interaction.

Despite these recurring patterns, empirical evidence does not consistently support clear-cut gender differences in platform preferences. For instance, Kirik et al. (2015) found no statistically significant gender differences in SM platform use and preference among Turkish university students, suggesting that widespread digital adoption may reduce gender distinctions in highly connected environments. Similarly, Annan-Brew and Nartey (2021) and Dzandu et al. (2016) reported no significant gender differences in platform preferences and usage among students at the University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana, respectively. Ufuophu-Biri (2020) also reported no significant relationship between gender and SM platform preferences among students of tertiary institutions in Delta State, Nigeria. Emerging evidence from other studies similarly indicates that gendered platform preferences vary across institutional and national

contexts. Ameyaw et al. (2017) found that although WhatsApp was the dominant platform among both male and female students at Koforidua Technical University, female students reported greater overall engagement with Facebook and multimedia-oriented platforms. Muasa and Maina (2025) noted that gender differences in platform preferences were evident among students at the University of Nairobi, with female students gravitating towards visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, while male students preferred gaming and information-oriented platforms. These contrasting findings indicate that platform preferences are influenced not only by gender but also by institutional context, digital infrastructure, cultural norms, and patterns of technology adoption.

2.2.2 Motivations and Purposes for SM Use

Studies from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Ghana indicate that male students are more likely to report using SM for information seeking, academic collaboration, news consumption, and public discourse, whereas female students more frequently emphasise relationship maintenance, entertainment, creative expression, and social interaction (Khan, 2012; Hossain & Prodhan, 2020; Ameyaw et al., 2017; Asante, 2024). Nevertheless, these differences should be interpreted as context-dependent tendencies rather than universal gender characteristics. Evidence from other contexts also reveals inconsistencies regarding gendered motivations for SM use. Ali et al. (2021) found that male students primarily used SM for entertainment, while female students emphasised educational and informational purposes. In contrast, Khan (2012) reported that male students were predominantly motivated by knowledge seeking, followed by entertainment and communication, whereas women primarily used SM for entertainment. Similarly, Horzum (2016) found that men were more strongly motivated by perceived usefulness and contributory benefits, while women placed greater emphasis on social interaction and process-related gratifications. Conversely, Ufuophu-Biri (2020) observed no significant gender differences in the motivations for SM use among Nigerian university students. These contrasting findings suggest that variations in cultural context, institutional environments and levels of digital maturity may moderate gendered patterns of use. Also, measurement approaches, and operational definitions of constructs such as academic use, information seeking, and entertainment may partly explain the lack of consistency across studies.

Empirical studies indicate that visual platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok provide particularly strong affordances for identity expression. Baker et al. (2019), for example, found that Instagram use among college women involved activities such as posting, self-promotion, and seeking engagement from other users. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2016) reported that women are more likely to use seductive profile images and emotional expression to attract followers, while men frequently showcased social activities and achievements. Weissman (2021) likewise found the use of short-form audio-visual media platforms such as TikTok among female college students for entertainment, creativity, social participation, and identity expression. Asante (2024) similarly found that female students used SM to satisfy multiple needs, including entertainment, emotional support, online shopping, and academic activities. These findings, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that women inherently have greater interest in appearance or self-presentation. Rather, the affordances of visual platforms interact with social expectations concerning femininity, attractiveness, sociability, and peer recognition. Likes, comments, shares, followers, and other forms of visible feedback can become mechanisms through which users assess and negotiate their online identities.

Recent scholarship on SM self-presentation similarly emphasises that users manage their visibility strategically, balancing authenticity with the desire for social approval and favourable audience perceptions. Such processes can be particularly consequential for young adults whose identities are still being negotiated within peer and institutional environments. Gendered expectations may also influence how particular forms of online behaviour are interpreted. The same practice, such as posting photographs, participating in debates, creating videos, or building a professional profile, may be evaluated differently depending on whether it is associated with men or women. For example, women's engagement with visually oriented platforms may be interpreted through expectations surrounding appearance and sociability, whereas men's engagement with platforms such as X, Facebook, or LinkedIn may be more readily associated with information exchange, public debate, professional development, or achievement. Such interpretations are important because they demonstrate that gendered SM practices are produced not only through individual choices but also through the social meanings attached to those choices.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite the volume of empirical research, significant gaps persist. There is limited context-specific evidence from northern Ghana, insufficient triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods, and inadequate attention to how institutional environments shape gendered digital practices. The mixed findings across GS and regional studies underscore the need for contextually grounded investigations that move beyond universalised assumptions and examine how gendered SM usage emerges within specific socio-cultural and infrastructural conditions. A further limitation of the existing literature concerns methodological design. Most studies examining gender differences in SM usage rely on cross-sectional survey data and self-reported measures of behaviour. Such approaches are useful for identifying associations but provide limited evidence regarding causality. Therefore, the existing empirical landscape justifies the

present study. By examining gender differences in platform preference and usage patterns among undergraduates at UBIDS in northern Ghana, this study addresses a clear geographical and contextual gap. Again, through the integration of survey data, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, the study contributes methodological triangulation that moves beyond descriptive accounts toward a more nuanced understanding of how gendered SM practices are shaped by institutional environment, technological affordances, and socio-cultural expectations.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopted a pragmatist philosophy to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. Integrating both positivist and interpretivist philosophies, the researcher aimed to thoroughly explore and explain the study phenomenon (Morgan, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Research Approach and Design

The mixed-methods approach was adopted for this study. This is because; combining both approaches (quantitative and qualitative) overcame the loopholes in using only one approach in a complementary manner. The study used the convergent concurrent mixed-methods design to simultaneously collect quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.3 Target Population

The target populations for this study were undergraduates (levels 200, 300, and 400) and staff at UBIDS. The students were chosen due to their prior experience using SM in the university environment. First-year (Level 100) students were excluded from the study because of their limited SM usage experience at the university environment.

3.4 Sample Size Determination

Yamane's formula $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$ was used to determine the sample size of the population under study. This yielded a sample size of 365 undergraduate students (levels 200, 300 and 400) of UBIDS.

$$n = 4,119 / (1 + 4,119 (0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 4,119 / (1 + 4,119 (0.0025))$$

$$n = 4,119 / (1 + 10.2975)$$

$$n = 4,119 / 11.2975$$

$$n = 364.5939$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study is 365 undergraduate students (level 200, 300 and 400) of UBIDS.

3.5 Sampling Techniques

Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were employed for the study. For probability sampling, multi-stage sampling—stratified random and proportionate sampling techniques—was used. In this study, the university's population was divided into subgroups (strata) based on academic faculties and schools. Each of these faculties and schools (strata) was further subdivided by gender (men and women). Given that the study focuses on the gendered SM use among students from various faculties and schools, there were eight (8) strata, corresponding to the number of faculties and schools offering undergraduate programmes. Each of these strata were further divided by gender to ensure the representation of both men and women in the sampling process. The researchers then selected respondents from each gender within each stratum, ensuring fair representation based on the proportion of undergraduate men and women in each faculty or school, thus employing a proportional stratified sampling technique. Purposive sampling was employed as non-probability sampling technique to select key informants (KIs) and FGD participants.

**Table 1***Proportions of students sampled within faculties/schools, and gender*

Name of faculty/school	Selected sample	Proportion (%) of men sample	Percentage (%) of women sample
Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS)	39	23 (59%)	16 (41%)
Faculty of Planning and Land Management (FPLM)	64	49 (76%)	15 (24%)
Faculty of Social Science and Arts (FoSSA)	29	20 (70%)	9 (30%)
Faculty of Public Policy and Governance (FPPG)	20	12 (58%)	8 (42%)
Faculty of Information and Communication Technology (FICT)	25	21 (86%)	4 (14%)
School of Education and Life-Long Learning (SoELL)	87	52 (60%)	35 (40%)
School of Business (SoB)	85	56 (66%)	29 (34%)
School of Law (SoL)	16	14 (89%)	2 (11%)
Total	365	247 (68%)	118 (32%)

3.6 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

3.6.1 Quantitative Data

Questionnaires: The study employed questionnaires to elicit information from undergraduate students at UBIDS regarding their utilization of SM within the academic environment. Specifically, the questionnaires were aimed at collecting data on the respondents' SM platform preferences, purposes of use, and other usage behaviors at UBIDS academic environment.

3.6.2 Qualitative Data

Key informant interviews (KIIs): To gather insights into the gendered SM usage behaviors, KIIs were conducted with twelve KIs, specifically nine teaching and one non-teaching staff, and two Student Representative Council (SRC) leaders who possess significant knowledge on gendered SM platforms preferences and usage behaviors within UBIDS. **Focus group discussion (FGD):** The FGD technique was employed to gather data from eight (8) selected undergraduate course representatives (four men and four women) across the eight (8) academic faculties and schools at UBIDS. The General Course Representatives from the various faculties and schools were purposively selected to represent their respective academic faculties and schools. They were chosen based on their leadership roles within their class groups and their deeper insights on SM usage behaviors of their peers on campus. Each of the FGDs lasted for approximately 50 minutes. During the sessions, the researcher acted as a moderator, guiding the discussions among the participants. The researcher maintained a minimal role by posing questions and allowing the natural group dynamics to unfold. Due to the small number of participants in each FGD, all participants actively participated and shared their perspectives on the study topic. The FGDs enabled the gathering of comprehensive information on gender differences in SM platform preferences and usage behaviors within the University setting.

3.7 Data Analysis and Presentation Tools

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis tools. The quantitative data were imported from Google Forms into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25, cleaned, and analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of independence. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondents' characteristics and SM usage patterns, while chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether statistically significant associations existed between gender and SM platform preferences and purposes of use. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$), and the results were presented using tables and charts. In contrast, qualitative data gathered were manually transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, with findings presented in a narrative format and supported by relevant quotations, all organized around emerging themes.

3.8 Reliability and Validity

Pilot survey serves as a simulation of the main survey, allowing the researcher to identify any potential weaknesses in the questionnaire and survey techniques for necessary modifications or improvements (Kothari & Garg, 2014). The data collection process commenced with the researchers designing the survey questionnaire and conducting a pilot study to assess its suitability and appropriateness. The pilot study involved thirty (30) undergraduates (levels 200, 300, and 400) enrolled in the Development Communication program at UBIDS. Development Communication students were chosen due to their academic focus on communication and media-related courses, which include new media studies. Moreover, undergraduate (levels 200, 300, and 400) students were selected to ensure that the questionnaire is tailored to their colleagues in other faculties and schools. Other instruments like, interview guides were administered to two lecturers at the Department of Communication Studies of UBIDS. Also, the researchers maintained reflexivity throughout the research by recognising that their background experiences, assumptions, and positionality could

influence data collection and interpretation. To minimise potential bias, participants were encouraged to express their views freely, interview and FGD questions were applied consistently, and findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were compared during interpretation. This reflexive approach helped distinguish participants' perspectives from the researchers' own assumptions.

3.9 Ethical Consideration

The study ensured that respondents and participants were fully informed about the topic and objectives of the research, allowing them to make informed decisions regarding their participation. Thus, consent was sought from all respondents and participants. Confidentiality of information and anonymity of respondents and participants were strictly maintained. In this research, respondents and participants participated voluntarily without any form of coercion. Additionally, proper acknowledgment and referencing have been given to all cited works.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 below outlines the demographic characteristics of the respondents, including their gender, age, and academic level. This information provides a comprehensive overview of the survey respondents.

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender of respondents	Men	247	68%
	Women	118	32%
	Total	365	100%
Age of respondents	15-20	31	8.5%
	21-25	225	61.6%
	26-30	78	21.4%
	31-35	23	6.3%
	36-40	7	1.9%
	41 and above	1	0.3%
	Total	365	100%
Academic levels of respondents	200	127	34.8%
	300	107	29.3%
	400	131	35.9%
	Total	365	100%

The demographic characteristics of the respondents, as shown in Table 2, provide useful insights into the composition of the survey respondents. The gender distribution indicates a significant men majority, with 247 men respondents comprising 68% of the total sample, compared to 118 women respondents, who represent 32%. This disparity underscores the prominence of men respondents in the study and reflects gender enrolment patterns that exist within the university environment. The age distribution of respondents reveals that the majority are within the 21–25 years age range, accounting for 61.6% of the total sample.

4.2 Gender Disparity in SM Platform Preferences

Table 3 presents the distribution of undergraduates' preferences for SM platforms by gender at UBIDS. The analysis reveals both convergence and divergence in platform preferences, indicating that while certain platforms are widely used by both male and female students, others exhibit noticeable gendered tendencies.

Table 3

Gender differences in SM platforms preferences among UBIDS undergraduates

SM platform	Men, n (%)	Women, n (%)	χ^2 (df = 1)	p-value	Decision
Facebook	168 (68.0)	64 (54.2)	5.964	.015	Significant
WhatsApp	240 (97.2)	110 (93.2)	2.233	.135	Not significant
YouTube	130 (52.6)	71 (60.2)	1.542	.214	Not significant
X (formerly Twitter)	91 (36.8)	33 (28.0)	2.423	.120	Not significant
TikTok	108 (43.7)	76 (64.4)	12.849	<.001	Significant
Instagram	90 (36.4)	50 (42.4)	0.952	.329	Not significant

Skype	16 (6.5)	10 (8.5)	0.227	.634	Not significant
Snapchat	80 (32.4)	65 (55.1)	16.244	<.001	Significant
Telegram	133 (53.8)	60 (50.8)	0.180	.671	Not significant
LinkedIn	58 (23.5)	18 (15.3)	2.799	.094	Not significant
Google+	109 (44.1)	44 (37.3)	1.267	.260	Not significant
Flickr	12 (4.9)	7 (5.9)	0.032	.857	Not significant
Others	4 (1.6)	2 (1.7)	0.000	1.000	Not significant

Note: Percentages are calculated within gender groups (men, $n = 247$; women, $n = 118$). Pearson's chi-square tests were conducted using Yates' continuity correction. $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

The chi-square results indicate that gender was significantly associated with preferences for only three of the platforms examined: Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat. Men reported significantly greater use of Facebook ($p=.015$) than women, whereas women reported significantly greater use of TikTok and Snapchat. The strongest gender difference was observed for Snapchat ($p<.001$), followed by TikTok ($p<.001$), suggesting that these visually oriented platforms may have particular relevance to women's reported SM engagement within the UBIDS context. However, the findings also demonstrate considerable cross-gender convergence. Gender differences were not statistically significant for WhatsApp, YouTube, and other platforms. This is particularly important because WhatsApp was extensively used by both groups, indicating that some platforms function as shared digital infrastructures rather than as distinctly gendered spaces. Thus, although gendered differentiation exists, it is platform-specific rather than universal.

Data from the FGDs and KIIs indicate that participants perceived gender as an important factor shaping SM platform preferences among UBIDS undergraduates. Across Level 200, 300, and 400 FGDs and KIIs, TikTok and Snapchat were consistently associated more strongly with female students, whereas Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and YouTube were perceived as attracting relatively greater participation from male students. Importantly, these accounts represent students' perceptions of prevailing patterns within the university rather than as fixed behavioural characteristics of male and female students. The perceived differences in platform preference appeared to be closely associated with the affordances and activities that students attributed to particular platforms. TikTok and Snapchat were associated with female students largely because of their audio-visual and interactive features. For instance, Level 400 participants observed that

"TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram are preferred platforms for ladies due to content creation. Although men are there, ladies dominate on these platforms" (Level 400 FGD, July 2024).

Similarly, Level 200 participants reiterated that

"Snapchat and TikTok are particularly popular among the ladies... ladies tend to excel on these platforms..." (Level 200 FGD, July 2024).

Thus, the perceived popularity of these platforms among female students was linked not simply to gender, but also to the types of activities and forms of interaction that participants associated with their technological features. In contrast, participants associated Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube relatively more strongly with male students because of its perceived suitability for debates and discussions, professional networking, and information seeking. As Level 400 participants succinctly stated,

"Men prefer platforms like Twitter because of arguments and banters..." (Level 400 FGD, July 2024).

A similar opinion was shared by Level 300 participants, who emphasised that

"Men like platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube..." (Level 300 FGD, July 2024).

A key informant similarly noted that

"Men prefer Facebook and Twitter because of current affairs, political and leadership content on these platforms" (KII, July 2024).

The findings therefore suggest that participants perceived a relationship between platform preference and the purposes for which platforms are considered useful. Platforms perceived as female-dominated were associated more strongly with visual expression and content creation, whereas platforms perceived as male-dominated were associated with information, debate, and professional or instrumental activities. Nevertheless, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence of rigid gender boundaries in platform use. Importantly, the findings do not imply that male and female students exclusively occupy different digital spaces. Participants acknowledged that both groups use the various platforms, although the visibility and perceived intensity of participation differed. The observed distinctions are therefore better interpreted as context-specific tendencies rather than inherent male or female preferences. This distinction is particularly important because participants' perceptions of platform preferences may themselves be shaped by peer culture and prevailing gender expectations—for example, by associating women's preference for TikTok and Snapchat with appearance, entertainment, and content creation and men's preference for discussion platforms like X, Facebook, and LinkedIn with intellectual or professional activity.

4.2.1 Gender differences in purposes for SM usage among UBIDS undergraduate students

Table 4 presents the chi-square analysis of the association between gender and the purposes for which undergraduate students use SM. Purposes were examined independently using Pearson's chi-square test.

Table 4

Gender differences in purpose for SM usage among UBIDS undergraduate students

Purpose of SM use	Men, n (%)	Women, n (%)	χ^2 (df = 1)	p-value	Decision
Socialisation and making friends	199 (80.6)	86 (72.9)	2.325	.127	Not significant
Staying in touch with family / friends	132 (53.4)	83 (70.3)	8.734	.003	Significant
Latest/current news or events	158 (64.0)	78 (66.1)	0.079	.778	Not significant
Entertainment/Fun	131 (53.0)	89 (75.4)	15.792	<.001	Significant
Business purposes	96 (38.9)	44 (37.3)	0.031	.861	Not significant
Leisure/Relaxation	75 (30.4)	45 (38.1)	1.847	.174	Not significant
Other purposes	12 (4.9)	4 (3.4)	0.135	.713	Not significant

Note: Percentages are calculated within gender groups (men, $n = 247$; women, $n = 118$). Pearson's chi-square tests were conducted using Yates' continuity correction. $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

The survey results show that gender was significantly associated with two of the reported purposes of SM use: staying in touch with family and friends and entertainment/fun. A larger gender difference was observed for entertainment/fun ($p < .001$), which was substantially more prevalent among women. These results suggest that the clearest gender differentiation in the purpose of SM use at UBIDS relates to relational connectivity and entertainment rather than to SM use generally. Although these tendencies were evident in the survey responses, they should not be interpreted as fixed characteristics of men and women. Rather, they represent context-specific patterns observed among the study participants.

The qualitative data provided contextual explanations for the gender differences identified in the survey results, particularly in relation to the purposes for which SM platforms are used. Participants consistently perceived gender as influencing both the choice of SM platforms and the ways in which those platforms are used. The qualitative accounts suggest that platform preference and purpose of use are closely interconnected. The visual and interactive features of TikTok and Snapchat were perceived to encourage forms of engagement centred on entertainment, self-expression, and social visibility. For instance, Level 300 participants explained that

“Ladies are drawn to SM (particularly TikTok and Snapchat) because they like entertainment, content creation, taking pictures and posing to showcase their beauty and attract attention...” (Level 300 FGD, July 2024).

The SRC Women's Commissioner similarly noted that

“Ladies usually use SM platforms for entertainment” (KII, July 2024).

These accounts reveal that students' interpretations of SM use are themselves gendered. The tendency to associate women's use of visually oriented SM platforms with appearance, entertainment, and attention seeking may reflect broader expectations concerning femininity and online self-presentation. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that women inherently use SM for entertainment or self-presentation. Rather, they indicate how gender norms and peer perceptions may influence both digital practices and the interpretation of those practices.

Conversely, male students were commonly perceived as using SM for more informational, academic, political, and professional purposes. Male students' use of X (formerly Twitter) was particularly associated with public debate and current affairs, while LinkedIn was viewed as supporting career development and professional visibility. As noted by Level 400 participants,

“Men use platforms like LinkedIn to build their professional profile and CV for the job market. Also, platform like Twitter because of banter, debates, sports...” (Level 400 FGD, July 2024).

A similar perspective was shared by Level 200 participants, who reiterated that

“Men use SM platforms for information, politics, sports, arguments.... Even when guys use platforms like TikTok, they normally fancy political talks and debates...” (Level 200 FGD, July 2024).

Participants also perceived male students as making greater use of SM for learning and information gathering. These perceptions suggest that the purposes students associate with particular SM platforms may contribute to the emergence of gendered patterns of digital engagement within the university.

The qualitative results also suggested a perceived difference in the intensity and duration of SM engagement. Female students were generally described as spending more time on platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram. Participants linked this to continuous content feeds, entertainment, interaction, and content creation. However, prolonged engagement should not automatically be equated with addiction or problematic use. Time spent on SM may also reflect legitimate activities such as entrepreneurship, social interaction, content production, or information

consumption. This distinction is important because measures of duration capture intensity of use but do not, by themselves, establish behavioural dependency. The KIIs broadly reinforced the FGDs findings while providing an institutional perspective. One key informant stated that

“the ladies are more engrossed in SM usage,” particularly on Snapchat and TikTok, whereas male students were perceived as making greater use of SM for academic purposes (KII, July 2024).

Another similarly observed that women were

“more drawn to entertainment platforms like Snapchat and TikTok,” while men were perceived as using SM more effectively for academic purposes (KII, July 2024).

These accounts corroborate the general pattern emerging from the FGDs but should again be interpreted as institutional perceptions rather than objective measures of students' behaviour.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that platform preference and purpose of use are not separate dimensions of gendered SM practices; they are interconnected. Platforms perceived as more attractive to female students were simultaneously associated with entertainment, visual expression, and content creation, whereas platforms associated with male students were more frequently linked to information, debate, academic engagement, and professional networking. Nevertheless, these patterns were neither universal nor mutually exclusive. The convergence between the quantitative and qualitative evidence consequently provides a more nuanced interpretation of gender differences in SM use at UBIDS. Rather than simply establishing that men and women prefer different platforms or use SM for different purposes, the qualitative evidence helps explain why particular platforms become associated with particular forms of gendered engagement within the university context. This moves the analysis beyond a descriptive male–female comparison toward an understanding that gendered patterns of SM use at UBIDS are produced through the interaction between platform affordances, perceived purposes of use, institutional context, peer culture, and broader socio-cultural expectations, rather than from inherent differences between male–female students.

4.3 Discussion

The study findings reveal that SM use among UBIDS undergraduates combines considerable cross-gender convergence with context-specific differences in platform preference and purpose of use. The quantitative results indicate that WhatsApp occupies a particularly important position among both male and female students, suggesting that some platforms have become embedded in students' everyday academic and social communication irrespective of gender. This finding is consistent with Ameyaw et al. (2017), Ogundele et al. (2023), and Mushimiyimana et al. (2026) who identified WhatsApp as a common and dominant platform among both female and male students. Its widespread use at UBIDS can be understood through the UGT, as WhatsApp simultaneously fulfils needs for communication, information sharing, coordination, and interpersonal relationship maintenance. From the perspective of UTAUT, its accessibility, ease of use, relatively low data requirements, and compatibility with existing student communication practices may also explain its widespread adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Thus, the high level of WhatsApp use across gender groups suggests that when a platform becomes embedded in the institutional communication environment, its functional value may outweigh gender-based differences in preference.

The statistically significant differences observed for Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat, however, indicate that gender differentiation becomes more visible on particular platforms. Men reported greater use of Facebook, whereas women reported greater use of TikTok and Snapchat. These findings partially corroborate Asante (2024), Weissman (2021), and Hossain and Prodhon (2020) who reported gendered differences in platform preferences. However, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that men inherently prefer text-based or informational platforms while women inherently prefer visually oriented platforms. Rather, the differences may reflect the interaction between platform affordances, peer cultures, social expectations and the gratifications that students associate with particular applications. The qualitative evidence reinforces this interpretation. Participants associated TikTok and Snapchat with entertainment, visual expression and content creation among female students, while Facebook and X were more frequently linked to information, debate and current affairs among male students. These perceptions suggest that platforms acquire gendered meanings within the university community through patterns of use and peer interpretation. Importantly, YouTube did not exhibit a statistically significant gender difference, despite being perceived qualitatively as somewhat more popular among men. This reinforces the argument that gendered digital practices cannot be reduced to simple male/female platform binaries.

The findings concerning purposes of SM use provide further evidence of both convergence and differentiation. Although men reported higher levels of socialisation and making friends descriptively, the chi-square test showed that this difference was not statistically significant. Likewise, no significant gender difference was found in the use of SM to follow current news and events. These findings are important because they indicate that social interaction and information access constitute shared dimensions of students' digital lives rather than exclusively gendered activities. The statistically significant differences emerged primarily in relation to maintaining contact with family and friends and entertainment/fun. Women were significantly more likely than men to report using SM for entertainment/fun. This

finding corroborates Hossain and Prodhon (2020), Ameyaw et al. (2017), and Asante (2024), but differs from Chan et al. (2015) Ali et al. (2021), Ogundele et al. (2023), who reported entertainment-oriented use among male students.

The qualitative findings provide further explanation for these patterns. Participants frequently characterised female students' use of SM particularly TikTok and Snapchat in terms of entertainment, content creation, and online self-expression, while male students' use of X, Facebook and LinkedIn was associated with information, politics, sports, debate and professional development. These perceptions broadly corroborate studies (e.g., Baker et al., 2019; Weissman, 2021; Asante, 2024; Muasa & Maina, 2025) which similarly observed gendered differences in platform use and online self-presentation. Also, UGT helps explain this pattern by emphasising that users select SM according to the gratifications they seek. The visual, interactive and algorithmically personalised features of platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat may make them particularly suitable for entertainment, social interaction and self-expression. However, these findings should not be interpreted to mean that entertainment is inherently a female form of SM use. Rather, it may reflect the particular platform environments, peer cultures and social expectations within which students engage with SM. The qualitative evidence further reveals that these interpretations are themselves socially constructed. Female students' online activities were often framed in terms of beauty, visibility, and attention, while male students' participation was more commonly described in relation to productivity, knowledge acquisition, political and leadership discourse. UTAUT helps explain these patterns by showing that social influence and gender norms shape perceptions of appropriate platform use, thereby influencing students' platform preferences.

The finding that female students were perceived as spending more time on SM also requires careful interpretation. It differs from studies that have reported higher levels of problematic or addictive SM use among male students (e.g., Alnjadat et al., 2019; Azizi et al., 2019), but is consistent with Ghanaian and other evidence suggesting greater engagement among female students (Simsek et al., 2019; Oslé & Rosales, 2023; Ameyaw et al., 2017; Asante, 2024). The difference may partly arise from the way SM engagement is measured. Time spent online should not automatically be equated with addiction or problematic use because extended engagement among female students within UBIDS context may involve social interaction, content production, entrepreneurship, or other purposeful activities. Consequently, the present findings support a distinction between intensity of use and problematic use, which is important when interpreting gender differences in students' digital behaviour.

Importantly, the study findings have implications for digital pedagogy in Ghanaian higher education. The extensive use of WhatsApp and other SM platforms indicates that students already possess digital spaces through which academic communication and peer learning can occur. Rather than treating SM solely as a distraction, lecturers and institutions including UBIDS could strategically incorporate appropriate platforms into blended learning, peer discussion, resource sharing, collaborative tasks and academic announcements. This is particularly relevant within Ghana's continuing digital transformation of higher education, where effective technology integration requires attention not only to access but also to students' digital practices and educators' pedagogical capacity. Recent research on Ghanaian higher education similarly points to the importance of institutional support and pedagogically purposeful integration of digital technologies rather than technology adoption for its own sake (Antwi-Boampong, 2024; Darko et al., 2025). Conversely, the gender differences identified in this study suggest that digital pedagogy should avoid assuming that all students engage with SM in the same way. The relatively stronger informational and academic orientation reported among male students and the stronger entertainment and visually oriented engagement reported among female students provide useful starting points for designing inclusive digital learning activities. However, such differences should not be used to assign particular platforms or learning roles to students on the basis of gender. Instead, higher education institutions should provide students of all genders with opportunities to develop digital literacy, critical information literacy, online safety, content-creation skills and the capacity to use diverse platforms for academic and professional purposes.

Overall, the findings suggest that gender remains relevant to understanding SM use at UBIDS, but its influence operates through the interaction of motivations, platform affordances, peer expectations and institutional circumstances. The convergence around platforms such as WhatsApp demonstrates that shared educational needs can reduce gender differences, while divergence across platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, X and LinkedIn reflects differences in the activities and gratifications associated with them. The study therefore extends existing evidence by showing that gendered SM use among students in UBIDS is context-dependent rather than universal, with important implications for how universities approach digital communication, student engagement and inclusive digital pedagogy.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that SM use among undergraduates at UBIDS reflects both shared and gender-differentiated patterns. WhatsApp, in particular, emerged as a common communication platform across male and female students, reflecting its importance for maintaining social connections, sharing information, and supporting academic

communication. At the same time, statistically and qualitatively observed differences in platform preferences and purposes of use indicate that gender remains a relevant factor in students' digital practices. Male students tended to associate SM more strongly with information seeking, academic engagement, political discourse, and professional networking, while female students showed greater preference for visually oriented platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat, particularly for entertainment, creative expression, and social interaction. Notably, the findings do not support an interpretation of these differences as inherent or biologically determined characteristics of males and females. Rather, gendered patterns of SM use appear to emerge through the interaction of individual motivations, platform affordances, peer influence, institutional experiences, and wider socio-cultural expectations. The qualitative findings are particularly important in this regard because they demonstrate that students' perceptions of what constitutes typical SM behaviour for males and females are themselves shaped by prevailing gender norms. Thus, the study understands gender not simply as a demographic category that predicts SM use, but as a socially mediated factor through which students' motivations, platform choices, and digital practices are shaped and interpreted. The findings therefore caution against treating male and female students as homogeneous categories and underscore the importance of examining the contextual conditions through which gendered digital practices emerge. Also, the findings have implications for higher education practice. It demonstrates that higher education institutions such as UBIDS can strategically incorporate widely used SM platforms into digital pedagogy, while ensuring that such practices do not reproduce gender stereotypes or unequal participation.

Moreover, the study contributes to theory by showing the complementary value of UGT and UTAUT in explaining gendered SM use patterns. UGT helps explain why students select particular platforms based on the gratifications they seek, including socialisation, information, entertainment, and self-expression, while UTAUT highlights the roles of performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions in shaping SM use. The combination of the two perspectives therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of gendered SM practices than either framework would provide independently. Furthermore, it contributes to the growing literature on digital behaviour in African higher education by providing context-specific evidence from UBIDS in northern Ghana, a setting that remains comparatively underrepresented in SM research. It reveals that gender differences in SM use are neither universal nor static; rather, they are negotiated within particular educational, technological, and socio-cultural settings. Last but not least, it makes a methodological contribution by employing mixed-methods to demonstrate a distinction between observed gendered SM practices and socially constructed perceptions of the practices.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed. UBIDS, through the DIMS, Gender and Academic Affairs Directorates, and SRC, should institutionalise periodic digital literacy and digital wellbeing programmes for undergraduates. These programmes should cover responsible SM use, online privacy and security, cyber safety, information and digital literacy, media education, and management of screen time. Such programmes should be gender-inclusive and avoid treating particular platforms or patterns of use as inherently male or female. The university should integrate widely used SM platforms into teaching and learning in a structured and academically purposeful manner. The predominance of WhatsApp among both male and female students provides an opportunity for lecturers to use moderated WhatsApp groups for academic notices, peer discussion, collaborative assignments, consultations, and resource sharing. Similarly, YouTube and other suitable platforms can be incorporated for instructional videos, demonstrations, and supplementary learning materials. To implement this effectively, UBIDS should provide lecturers with training and guidelines on appropriate SM-based pedagogy, including issues of privacy, moderation, accessibility, and assessment.

Given the gendered differences identified in platform preferences and purposes of use, the university should develop inclusive digital engagement and professional development initiatives that expand students' use of SM beyond their dominant patterns of engagement. For example, students who primarily use visually oriented platforms for entertainment and social interaction could be supported to explore digital entrepreneurship, content creation, educational communication, and professional branding, while students who predominantly use information-oriented platforms could also be encouraged to engage in creative and collaborative digital activities. These initiatives should not reinforce stereotypes about what men or women should do online; instead, they should provide all students with equitable opportunities to develop diverse digital competencies. UBIDS should also strengthen support for digital entrepreneurship and innovation by integrating practical training in digital marketing, content creation, SM analytics, personal branding, e-commerce, and online business management into existing entrepreneurship and career-development programmes. This recommendation is particularly relevant because the findings indicate that students use SM also for business promotion and other productive activities. Partnerships between the university, industry practitioners, alumni, and student-led enterprises could provide workshops, mentorship, and practical projects through which students can translate their SM skills into entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

Finally, future research should extend the scope of investigation beyond the present institutional setting. Comparative studies involving universities in northern and southern Ghana, as well as institutions across other African

contexts, would help establish whether the gendered patterns identified at UBIDS are institution-specific or reflect broader regional trends. Future researchers should also consider longitudinal designs to examine changes in students' SM practices over time, particularly as platforms and their affordances evolve. Further research could employ larger and more gender-balanced samples and examine how factors such as socioeconomic status, academic discipline, age, digital literacy, and access to internet infrastructure interact with gender to shape SM use. Such research would provide a stronger basis for developing context-sensitive policies and interventions concerning students' digital engagement.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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