

DIGITAL NATIVES AT WORK: AN ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA UTILIZATION AMONG YOUTHS IN KISII COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed social media into a central platform for communication, education, entrepreneurship, entertainment, and civic engagement among young people. In Kenya, increasing internet penetration and smartphone adoption have significantly influenced how youths interact, learn, conduct business, and participate in public discourse. This study assessed social media utilization among youths in Kisii County, Kenya, with a focus on usage patterns, perceived benefits and associated challenges. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study employed a descriptive survey research design involving youths aged 18–34 years selected through stratified sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and focus group discussions and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings indicate that social media is extensively utilized by youths for communication, social networking, business promotion, educational engagement, information seeking, and civic participation. The study further established that digital platforms have created opportunities for entrepreneurship, income generation, knowledge acquisition, and community engagement. However, several challenges continue to affect effective utilization of social media, including misinformation, digital addiction, cyberbullying, privacy concerns, and online fraud. The findings demonstrate that social media has become an integral component of youths' social and economic lives, enhancing both personal and professional opportunities. The study concludes that while social media presents significant opportunities for youth empowerment and development, maximizing its benefits requires strengthened digital literacy, responsible online practices, enhanced cybersecurity awareness, and support for youth-led digital entrepreneurship initiatives.

Keywords: Social media utilization, digital natives, youth empowerment, digital entrepreneurship, civic engagement, Kisii County, Kenya.

Introduction

Social media has turned out to be an accepted way of communication. Ellison & Boyd (2007) define social networking sites as web-based service that allows users to: create public or semi-public profile in a system, share a connection, view and cross-list their relationship with others in a system. According to Dhayaashree, G. (2022). Social media applications are classified according to their functions such as blogs (word press), intranets, podcasts, video sharing (You Tube), photo sharing (Flickr), social network (Facebook, My Space) wikis

(Wikipedia), micro blogging (twitter) among others (Ingutia, 2025). Most of the social networks are web-based and provide means for their users to interact via the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging; social networks allow activities, events and interact within their individual networks. Makhulo (2024) argues that social media has recently become an integral part of our everyday lives, but it has been around long before Facebook and Twitter. What has changed is that social media is now widely available whereas it used to be

limited to those with an in-depth understanding of technology and underground hacker circles.

Social networking sites (SNSs) have also attracted increasing scholarly attention as being effective as both means of self-expression and for the management and amelioration of individual and group networks (Oblad, 2021). This is particularly applicable to the younger generation in technologically developed countries. SNSs allow individuals to create online profiles, share personal information, and view information created by others, thereby facilitating the formation of social networks among users (Onduko, 2025). Major social networking tools like Myspace and Facebook give people an online identity and an online space to call their own (Evans, 2023). The complete.com website in 2009 ranked Twitter and Facebook as one of the top social media platforms worldwide with most active users being youngsters recording a monthly usage of 180 billion members with a consumption of 180 terabytes worth of data annually.

Facebook, the most popular social network, surpassed the 500 million registered users in 2010 (Crunch base, 2010). The network's popularity with digital natives who grew up with social media is due in part to the network's ability to personalize content with interactivity as users share and discuss content with friends and family (Meta, 2022). Locally, according to www.bakers.com (2012), there are 1994720 Facebook users in Kenya which makes it number 65 in the ranking of all Facebook statistics by country. Facebook penetration in Kenya is 4.98% compared to the country's population and 19.01% in relation to the number of internet users (Meta, 2022). Mobile technologies including laptops, tablets, and smart phones allow us to be constantly connected, which has had a dramatic impact on how we communicate nowadays (Oblad, 2021).

In today's world, notes Matthews (2010), the success or failure of any company hinges on the way it communicates to the key stakeholders such as investors, consumers, employees and members of immediate community. Despite this growth, there is limited localized evidence on how youths in Kisii County specifically utilize social media. This study therefore examines patterns of use, benefits, and challenges associated with social media among youths in the

region. Despite this informative research, there are a few limitations noted in this research. To begin with, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias or social desirability bias (reporting what is perceived as the 'correct' answer rather than actual behavior), or an over/underestimation of one's own knowledge or exposure. Actual knowledge or behavior might differ from reported data. Second, measuring the impact of social media may be difficult due to the dynamic and complex nature of social interactions and social media use. Third, social media platforms and trends evolve rapidly. As such, by the time findings were compiled, some aspects of social media use or risks may have changed, potentially affecting the long-term relevance of the results.

This study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory. This theory suggests that media users actively select platforms that satisfy specific needs such as information, entertainment, identity formation, and social interaction (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The approach seeks to explain the reason behind people using a particular media and what motivates people to continually engage in using such media to derive gratifications to fulfill those needs (Buf & Stefanita, 2020). The theory also helps researchers to gain an understanding on why people switch from one media to another. In this context, youths are not passive consumers of social media but active participants who strategically use platforms to meet personal and socio-economic needs. Also, the adoption of the uses and gratification theory is informed by the fact that people consciously choose the medium (social media) that could satisfy their needs. The extent to which a social media platform is used to meet a demand is a measure of its effects and gratification. As such, users / media consumers actively choose specific media content based on their need. If there are any effects, either positive or negative, these are consciously or at least actionably intended (Dhayaashree, 2022).

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the patterns of social media utilization among youths in Kisii County. This design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect detailed information on existing conditions,

behaviors, and experiences without manipulating any variables. It is particularly suitable for studies that seek to describe and interpret social phenomena as they naturally occur, such as social media usage among young people. Furthermore, descriptive survey design raises concern for the economical completion of a research study. The target population for the study comprised youths aged between 18 and 34 years residing in Kisii County. This age group was selected because it represents the most active users of social media platforms and is commonly associated with digital engagement in communication, entrepreneurship, education, and social networking.

To ensure adequate representation of diverse perspectives, the population was divided into urban and rural strata. This ensured that youths from different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds within Kisii County were adequately represented in the study. Due to the study's large population, the Yamane (1967) formula was applied to determine an appropriate sample size. Therefore, a sample size of 180 youths was selected using stratified random sampling (based on age, gender and occupation), followed by simple random sampling within strata. This number was considered sufficient to provide meaningful and reliable insights into social media utilization patterns among youths in the county while remaining manageable for data collection and analysis. Therefore, this approach enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the findings by minimizing sampling bias. Data for the study was collected between January 2026 and April 2026.

Data for the study were collected using a combination of structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs). The structured questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data on social media usage patterns, frequency of use, preferred platforms, and purposes of engagement. On the other hand, focus group discussions provided qualitative insights into youths' experiences, motivations, perceptions, and challenges related to social media use. The integration of both methods enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of social media utilization among youths in Kisii County through methodological triangulation. A pilot study was carried out with 10% sample size (18 respondents) to test the

reliability of research instruments. The respondents were given questionnaires twice and responses were analyzed. The researcher sampled feedback from questionnaires issued to different groups and analyzed the correlation based on responses given. The researcher assessed internal consistency using Cronbach Alpha score. Results of computation of Cronbach alpha score of the pilot study showed that the reliability was above 0.7 meaning that the data collection instruments were highly reliable.

Data collected in this study were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media utilization among youths in Kisii County. Quantitative data obtained from structured questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages. This enabled the researcher to summarize and present patterns of social media use, including preferred platforms, frequency of access, and purposes of use among respondents (Creswell, 2014). The results were presented in tables and charts to enhance clarity and ease of interpretation. Data for the study were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Secondary data was collected from books, journals, articles and websites of the institutions as well as the internet. Primary data were gathered from the participants using structured close-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was self-administered because participants could read and understand.

Qualitative data generated from focus group discussions (FGDs) were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved transcribing participants' responses, coding recurring ideas, and grouping similar responses into themes. Qualitative data was analyzed in the form of a summary sheet whereby there was a compilation of specific phrases and key words used by the population under study to assist when describing certain themes and representing specific scenarios. Also, the researcher made use of short abbreviations as codes in labeling data. The thematic approach helped in identifying key patterns such as motivations for social media use, perceived benefits, challenges experienced, and attitudes toward digital engagement. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods ensured data triangulation, thereby improving the

validity and reliability of the study findings by capturing both statistical trends and in-depth experiential insights.

Results and Discussions

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 180)

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Age	18–24	104	58
	25–29	58	32
	30–34	18	10
Gender	Male	94	52
	Female	86	48
Occupation	Student	74	41
	Self-employed	52	29
	Unemployed	54	30

The findings indicate that most respondents were aged between 18 and 24 years, confirming that younger people constitute the most active users of digital technologies and social media platforms. The relatively balanced gender distribution suggests that social media use cuts across both male and female youths. From the responses, 94 (52%) were males while 86 (48%) were females as shown in the Table 1 above. The gender imbalance is not likely to affect the study as the nature of the research and questions asked were not gender sensitive and any unlikely error because of the gender imbalance may be tolerated. However, given that most of the responses in the research questions relied on opinions and perceptions, the gender distribution accommodated the perceptions and opinions of either gender. The dominance of respondents aged 18–24 confirms the argument that digital natives are the most active social media users. This aligns with Kim et al. (2025), who observe that younger users are more likely to integrate social media into everyday communication and learning. The presence of self-employed youths in Kisii also reflects the increasing role of digital platforms in informal economic activity, consistent with Al-Saiqal et al. (2024), who note that social media is reshaping youth entrepreneurship in developing economies.

Focus group discussions revealed that most participants had been using social media for several years and

considered digital platforms an indispensable part of their daily lives. One participant noted:

"I start and end my day with social media. It is where I get news, communicate with friends, and even find opportunities to earn money." (FGD Participant, Student)

These findings support Kim et al. (2025), who argue that younger generations integrate social media into routine communication, learning, and social interactions. The notable proportion of self-employed respondents further illustrates the growing role of digital platforms in supporting informal economic activities among young people.

Most Used Social Media Platforms

Table 2

Social Media Platform Usage

Platform	Usage (%)
WhatsApp	92
TikTok	78
Facebook	65
Instagram	54
YouTube	49
X	27

WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used social media platform, followed by TikTok and Facebook. The popularity of WhatsApp can be attributed to its affordability, ease of use, and low data consumption.

Participants in the focus groups consistently identified WhatsApp as their primary communication platform: *"WhatsApp is the most important app for me because it is cheap and everyone I know uses it. We use it for family groups, school groups, and business communication."* (FGD Participant, Self-employed Youth)

TikTok was particularly popular among younger respondents who viewed it as a source of entertainment, creativity, and income opportunities. *"TikTok has become more than entertainment. Some youths are making money through content creation and product promotion."* (FGD Participant, Youth Entrepreneur)

These findings align with Kemp (2024) and Khamis et al. (2024), who highlight the increasing dominance of

WhatsApp and TikTok among African youth populations. The dominance of WhatsApp reflects its affordability and accessibility, consistent with Kemp (2024), who identifies WhatsApp as the most widely used communication tool in Kenya. TikTok's rapid rise among youths supports findings by Khamis et al. (2024), who highlights its growing role in youth-driven content creation and digital entertainment economies. The platform diversity also reflects the fragmented nature of youth media consumption in the digital age.

Communication and Social Interaction

Table 3

Communication Functions

Function	%
Personal communication	88
WhatsApp groups	76
School communication	42
Business networking	31

The findings demonstrate that communication remains the primary reason for social media use among youths. WhatsApp groups were widely used for maintaining relationships, sharing information, and coordinating activities.

FGD participants emphasized the importance of social media in maintaining social connections: *"Social media helps us stay connected even when we are far apart. Most of our class discussions happen online."* (FGD Participant, University Student)

Another participant observed: *"Many community activities are coordinated through WhatsApp groups. Without social media, communication would be difficult."* (FGD Participant, Community Youth Leader)

The findings confirm that social media has become a primary communication infrastructure among youths. This supports Barati (2023), who argues that social media enhances interpersonal communication and social bonding among young users. WhatsApp groups, in particular, function as micro-communication ecosystems for education, business, and community coordination.

Digital Entrepreneurship and Income Generation

Table 4

Economic Use of Social Media

Activity	%
Business promotion	63
Income generation	38
Influencer marketing	22
Freelancing	18

The findings indicate that social media has become an important economic resource for youths. Many respondents reported using digital platforms to advertise products and services, attract customers, and generate income.

Focus group participants described social media as a low-cost business tool:

"I advertise my clothes on Facebook and WhatsApp status. Most of my customers contact me through social media." (FGD Participant, Small Business Owner)

Another participant stated:

"Social media gives young people a chance to earn income even without formal employment." (FGD Participant, Entrepreneur)

The findings indicate that social media is increasingly a tool for youth economic empowerment. This supports Al-Saiqal et al. (2024), who note that digital platforms reduce entry barriers to entrepreneurship by enabling low-cost marketing and direct consumer engagement. The emergence of influencer marketing among youths reflects the global rise of the creator economy (UNCTAD, 2023).

Educational Use of Social Media

Table 5

Educational Engagement

Use	%
Educational use	69
YouTube learning	57
WhatsApp academic groups	48

The study established that social media serves important educational functions among youths. Many respondents reported using YouTube tutorials, academic discussion groups, and online learning communities.

Focus group participants highlighted the value of YouTube as a learning platform:

"Whenever I don't understand something in class, I search for tutorials on YouTube." (FGD Participant, Student)

Another participant remarked:

"Our course groups on WhatsApp help us share notes and discuss assignments." (FGD Participant, University Student)

These findings are consistent with Selwyn (2020), who argues that social media increasingly functions as an informal learning environment that complements traditional education.

Civic Engagement and Information Sharing

Table 6

Civic Participation

Activity	%
Accessing news	61
Online discussions	47
Political expression	39

The findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in civic engagement by providing access to information and enabling participation in public discussions.

Participants noted that social media had become their primary source of news:

"Most of the news I receive comes through social media before it appears on television." (FGD Participant, Youth Leader)

Others viewed social media as a platform for expressing opinions on social and political issues:

"Young people can now speak about issues affecting them without waiting for traditional media." (FGD Participant, Graduate Youth)

These findings support Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2019), who argue that digital platforms facilitate youth civic participation and democratic engagement.

Challenges of Social Media Use

Table 7

Challenges

Challenge	%
Misinformation	74
Digital addiction	58
Cyberbullying	46
Privacy concerns	39
Online fraud	33

Despite the numerous benefits associated with social media use, respondents identified several challenges. Misinformation emerged as the most significant concern, followed by digital addiction and cyberbullying.

FGD participants expressed concern about the spread of false information:

"Sometimes it is difficult to know what is true because fake news spreads very fast on social media." (FGD Participant, Student)

Others highlighted the growing problem of online scams:

"Many youths have lost money through fake online businesses and fraudulent links." (FGD Participant, Entrepreneur)

Participants also acknowledged excessive use of social media:

"Some people spend too much time online and end up neglecting important responsibilities." (FGD Participant, Community Youth Leader)

These findings corroborate Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who identify misinformation as a major challenge in digital environments, and Montag et al. (2021), who associate excessive social media use with reduced productivity and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media is an essential tool for youth communication, entrepreneurship, education, and civic participation in Kisii County. However, challenges such as misinformation, addiction, and cyber risks limit its full potential. The findings confirm that youths are active digital agents who strategically use social media to meet socio-economic needs. No doubt,

social media is and will always remain a vital tool in human life as far communication is concerned. The study discovered that the nature of social media is as a useful servant but a dangerous master which depicts that it is useful and harmful at the same time depending on the way it is used by the youths. Social media has numerous adverse influences on the quality of life in every aspect. It is evident from the studies that social media has both positive and negative impact on our youths. Therefore, youths must be clear on purpose of using social media and how long they are online and make it beneficial to their personal and social networking purpose.

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations aimed at enhancing the positive utilization of social media while minimizing associated risks among youths in Kisii County:

- i) **Strengthening digital literacy programs among youths:** Government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations should intensify digital literacy training programs to equip youths with critical skills in evaluating online information, identifying misinformation, and effectively navigating digital platforms. Such programs should also emphasize media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible content creation.
- ii) **Promoting responsible social media usage:** Stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and youth organizations, should actively promote ethical and responsible engagement with social media. This includes encouraging balanced screen time, respectful online communication, and awareness of the social and psychological impacts of excessive social media use.
- iii) **Supporting youth digital entrepreneurship initiatives:** There is need for targeted support for youth-led digital enterprises through training, mentorship, and access to funding. Government and private sector actors should facilitate incubation programs that enable young people to monetize social media platforms through content creation, e-commerce, and online freelancing opportunities.

- iv) **Enhancing awareness of cybersecurity and online safety:** Continuous awareness campaigns should be implemented to educate youths on cybersecurity risks such as phishing, hacking, identity theft, cyberbullying, and online fraud. This can be achieved through school-based programs, community outreach, and collaboration with ICT regulatory authorities.
- v) **Encouraging the educational use of social media platforms:** Educational stakeholders should integrate social media into formal and informal learning systems by promoting its use for academic collaboration, access to learning materials, and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. Teachers and institutions should guide learners on how to use platforms such as YouTube.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors, while preparing this work, utilized ChatGPT for spellchecking and grammar refinement. The work was then carefully reviewed and edited as necessary and assumes full responsibility for the publication's content.

Declaration of funding sources

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. We conducted this study independently, without external financial support, to contribute to academic knowledge in the field of technology.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Migiro: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing-original draft preparation, Data curation. **Wabwire:** Writing -review & editing, Visualization, Supervision.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research. We have no financial or personal relationships with any individuals or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of this work. Our primary objective is to contribute to scholarly discourse and advance knowledge in the field without any competing interests.

Acknowledgement

We owe much thanks to International Research Journal of Rongo University for accepting making our work known to the world of academia.

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