



# Navigating Identity in Digital Spaces: Social Media and Identity Development Among Sexual and Gender Minority Students in Kenyan Universities

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**Abstract:** Social media has increasingly become a critical arena where Sexual and Gender Minority students explore, express and negotiate their identities, particularly in contexts characterized by stigma and limited offline support. However, empirical evidence on its influence on identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority students in Kenya remains limited. This study examined the influence of social media use on identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority undergraduate students in universities in Western Kenya. Guided by an integration of Affordances Theory and Minority Stress Theory, the study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 142 Sexual and Gender Minority undergraduate students using a semi-structured questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed high levels of social media engagement, with WhatsApp and TikTok emerging as the most frequently used platforms. Pearson's correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between social media use and identity development ( $r=0.413$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) with social media accounting for 17.1% of the variance in identity development. Nevertheless, there were reports of online harassment, discrimination and identity-based prejudice, highlighting the duality of social media. The study concludes that social media constitutes an important, though not exclusive, context for identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority students. It recommends strengthening digital safety initiatives and promotion of inclusive online environments that maximize the developmental benefits of social media while mitigating identity-related risks.

**Keywords:** Identity development, Digital spaces, Social media, Sexual and Gender Minority, Kenyan, Universities

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## 1. Introduction

Identity development -a central developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood- marks a crucial stage where individuals explore who they are in relation to their socio-cultural contexts (Jingxin, 2024). Identity is comprehensively conceptualized as a set of meanings

linked to roles that individuals play in the social structure, the groups they belong to and identify with, the distinctive ways in which they perceive themselves to be, as well as the perception others have of an individual (McLeod, 2026; Stets & Serpe, 2013). Meanings of identity thus refer to feedback derived from reflections made by individuals on their personal, social and role identities, making it both a

personal and social construct (Burke & Stets 2023; Jenkins, 2024). Identity is therefore not only shaped by traits and characteristics that distinguish an individual from others (personal identities), but also by one's social context, which ultimately influences one's behaviour (Alfrey, et al., 2023). Consequently, it becomes a dynamic phenomenon that is constantly changing as dictated by new occurrences in the environment.

The identity development process of Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) individuals markedly contrasts with that of their non-SGM counterparts since it involves active exploration, self-reflection and the deliberate management of identity disclosure (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Research indicates that SGM youth encounter unique difficulties during this stage and particularly when exploring their sexual identity due to the fear of being judged, discriminated against or harassed, given the nature of their sexual orientation (DeHaan, Magee, & Kuper, 2012). As a consequence of the homophobic and discriminating experiences they face in heteronormative and cisnormative contexts, they opt to conceal their identity for fear of experiencing violence, stigmatization, unexpected disclosure to unintended and unsought audiences, rejection and even the need to maintain relationships they may be having with significant others (Talbot et al., 2022).

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed how young people navigate identity-related processes, enabling them to construct and negotiate their identities through online interactions, self-expression and feedback they receive from others, all of which contribute to the development and refinement of their sense of self (Perez-Torres, 2024; Soh et al., 2024). Social media, in particular, have become instrumental in communication, self-expression, information seeking and community engagement. For SGM individuals, social media through its various platforms has emerged as a safer space for identity affirmation and community building as compared to their offline environments (Fisher, Tao, & Ford, 2024). Berger et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated that social media enables LGBTQ+ youth to connect with others, manage their social networks as well as disclosing aspects of their identities across geographical boundaries.

The influence of social media on SGM identity development, however is basically complex, because the same affordances that facilitate identity exploration and affirmation can also create opportunities for surveillance, harassment, discrimination, unwanted disclosure and identity concealment. For instance, Talbot et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ+ university students strategically managed their online visibility through practices such as self-censorship. Selective disclosure, privacy regulation and the use of multiple accounts. Such practices demonstrate that social media does not simply provide an unrestricted space for authentic identity expression, rather,

users continually assess characteristics of audiences and platforms when deciding what aspects of their identities to reveal or conceal.

This complexity is further illustrated by research on social media affordances. Coker et al. (2023) found that affordances such as personalization, anonymity, privacy, conversational control, network association and social presence could facilitate authentic expression, connection and community among LGBTQ+ users. Conversely, editability and persistence could create tensions around authenticity and visibility because users remain aware that online content can be modified, preserved, accessed by unintended audiences, or traced back to them. These findings suggest that social media may simultaneously expand the possibilities for identity development and introduce new constraints on how SGM individuals understand and present themselves.

The relationship between social media and identity development can also be understood through the concept of identity performance. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, individuals manage the presentation of themselves according to the expectations and characteristics of their audiences. Research among LGBTQ+ university students in the United Kingdom (UK) has shown that different social media platforms can function as different "stages" on which users negotiate identity expression, visibility and privacy (Talbot et al, 2020). Similarly, Colosi et al. (2023) found that LGBTQ+ users employed multiple platforms to construct favourable identities, affirm their sexuality and gender, and connect with supportive communities. At the same time, participants encountered heteronormative expectations on mainstream platforms, leading some to seek more specialised online spaces where they could express themselves with greater freedom.

In many African settings, SGM identities are negotiated against strong heteronormative expectations, stigma, discrimination and in some countries, legal restrictions on same-sex relationships. In Kenya, for example, conversations surrounding sexual and gender diversity remain highly contested within sociocultural, religious and political contexts (Maweu & Muthegethi, 2025). As a result of this, many SGM students may experience challenges accessing affirming support within their immediate environments. Furthermore, meanings of visibility, anonymity, disclosure and online community may differ considerably from those found in more socially accepting contexts.

These findings demonstrate that social media should not be conceptualised simply as either a protective or harmful environment for SGM identity development. Rather, its influence appears to depend on how individuals use particular platforms, how they manage audiences, the

affordances available to them, and the broader social environment in which digital engagement occurs. Social media can facilitate exploration, affirmation, community formation and authentic self-expression while simultaneously requiring users to negotiate visibility, concealment and potential social consequences. This duality makes social media an important but insufficiently understood context for SGM identity development.

Importantly, much of the existing evidence on SGM identity and social media originates from Western contexts including the United Kingdom (UK), where social, cultural and legal environments differ from those experienced by SGM populations in Kenya. Consequently, the meanings and consequences attached to online identity expression cannot necessarily be assumed to be transferable across contexts. The paucity of research in Kenya, and particularly Western Kenya, leaves limited empirical understanding of how SGM university students negotiate identity development within digital spaces while simultaneously navigating the expectations and constraints of their offline environments. The university context warrants specific attention because it represents a period of intensified identity exploration, expanding social networks and increasing independence from family and previous social environments. For SGM students, social media may extend these developmental opportunities by providing access to communities and information that are unavailable or difficult to access offline. On the flip side, the interconnectedness of university, family, peer and online networks may increase the risks associated with visibility and unintended disclosure. Without context-specific evidence, it remains difficult to determine whether social media primarily facilitates identity exploration and affirmation or reinforces identity concealment and constrained self-expression among SGM university students. Guided by an integration of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003; Frost & Meyer, 2023) and Affordances Theory (David, 2014; Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988; Norman, 2013; Khazraee, 2018; Soegaard, 2015), this study addresses this gap by examining social media not merely as a platform on which SGM identities are displayed or managed, but as a social environment within which identity development may be actively shaped.

## 2. Literature Review

Identity development is a dynamic process through which individuals construct, negotiate, and continually revise meanings about themselves in relation to others and the social environments they inhabit (Burke & Stets 2023; Jenkins, 2024). For Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) individuals, this process can involve additional layers of exploration and negotiation because sexual and gender identities may be developed within environments

characterised by heteronormativity, stigma, discrimination and uncertainty surrounding disclosure. Identity development among SGM populations therefore goes beyond internal self-understanding to include decisions concerning visibility, authenticity, disclosure, concealment and belonging.

Social media has increasingly been recognized as an important context for identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) individuals. As an alternative arena, it provides opportunities for them to access information about sexuality and gender, encounter people with similar experiences, explore possible identities, develop social connections and receive affirmation. For instance, a study by Fox and Ralston (2016) found out that through affordances such as interactivity, association, visibility, anonymity and persistence, social media provided an informal learning environment through which LGBTQ+ individuals acquired knowledge about emerging identities, as well as the experiences of others. Similarly, in a study by Bates et al. (2020), findings revealed that social media played a complex role in providing access to safe spaces for identity development of LGBTQ+ youth, a medium through which LGBTQ+ individuals sought out identities that matched their existing understanding of self, identity-related information and possibilities for expressing individuality within a broader community. These findings suggest that social media constitutes an environment within which young SGM individuals can discover who they are. More studies grounded on social media Affordance Theory further suggest that platform features shape identity development. Coker et al. (2023) found that affordances such as personalization, anonymity, privacy, conversation control and network association facilitated authentic self-expression and community building among LGBTQ+ users. Conversely, affordances such as editability and persistent digital footprints sometimes constrained authenticity by encouraging self-censorship. Berger et al. (2022) similarly observed that social media enabled LGBTQ+ youth to establish supportive networks, manage disclosure through privacy settings and strengthen identity affirmation.

A study by Talbot et al. (2022) from a range of universities in the UK indicated that students strategically managed the disclosure of their sexual orientation and gender identity through practices such as privacy management, multiple accounts and selective participation in LGBTQ+ online spaces. While platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter facilitated identity exploration, Facebook often constrained identity expression because of context collapse, where different social audiences converged. Similarly, Colosi et al. (2023) reported that social media platforms functioned

as spaces where SGM individuals performed and negotiated their identities. Although online communities promoted belonging and self-affirmation, mainstream platforms continued to reproduce heteronormative norms that limited authentic identity expression. Consequently, participants frequently relied on alternative online spaces that offered greater privacy and safety. Such findings demonstrate that the development and expression of identity are closely linked to the management of audiences. This translates to the fact that what an individual chooses to reveal online is therefore influenced not only by their developing sense of identity but also by perceptions of who may access that information and what consequences disclosure may produce.

Although African evidence remains limited, available studies indicate that SGM students experience identity development within more restrictive social environments than those described in Western literature. For instance, in South Africa, a study by Idemudia et al. (2015) found that sexual minority university students experienced identity conflict, discrimination and psychological distress, prompting many to conceal or negotiate their identities while relying on resilience and peer support to cope. Similarly, still from South Africa, a study by Makhowane (2021) reported that gay and lesbian university students from rural South African communities continuously negotiated the disclosure and concealment of their sexual identities in response to stigma, cultural expectations and experiences of exclusion, illustrating the influence of African socio-cultural contexts on identity development. (Strand, 2024), examining digital activism among LGBT+ organisations in Uganda, found out Facebook and Twitter functioned as important spaces for information dissemination, community services and organisational representation, but their emancipatory potential was constrained by the broader socio-political environment. The findings suggest that the possibilities afforded by platforms cannot be separated from the social, political and cultural contexts within which SGM identities are negotiated.

In the Kenyan context, Mwangi (2014) provides an important early examination of queer agency within digital media. Drawing on discourse analysis of digital content from Facebook, chat rooms, blogs, YouTube comments and online newspaper feedback, Mwangi found out that Kenyan digital spaces could simultaneously reproduce intense homophobia and provide opportunities for gay individuals to react to hostile representations and articulate their experiences and desires. These findings are significant as they position digital media as a contested space in which marginalisation and agency coexist. While

Mwangi's study establishes the presence of queer agency within Kenya's digital environment, it focused basically on discourse representation and responses/reactions to homophobia rather than identity development among young people. This leaves an important gap concerning how sustained social media engagement may contribute to the exploration, affirmation, negotiation and expression of SGM identities, particularly among university students. More recent Kenyan scholarship further suggests that digital platforms can facilitate queer visibility and agency. A study by Wainaina et al. (2025), for instance, examined the experiences of queer Kenyan women using Instagram and found out that the platform could be appropriated as a space for asserting queer agency and challenging the erasure of queer women. This emerging evidence strengthens the argument that social media can provide Kenyan SGM populations with opportunities for visibility and self-expression, while also highlighting the importance of examining these processes within their specific sociocultural context.

Put together, the African and Kenyan literature suggests that social media represents neither a uniformly liberating nor uniformly oppressive environment for SGM populations. Rather, it is a contested social space in which visibility, agency, community, self-expression, concealment and vulnerability can occur simultaneously. However, Kenyan scholarship remains limited in explaining how these digital experiences relate specifically to the broader developmental process of SGM identity formation. This gap becomes particularly important among university students, for whom identity development, expanding peer networks and increasing autonomy coincide with intensive engagement with digital platforms. The present study therefore builds on the emerging Kenyan literature by examining the influence of social media use on identity development among SGM undergraduate students in universities in Western Kenya.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed convergent parallel mixed methods design. This research design entails concurrent or simultaneous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in a single phase, analysing the data separately and then comparing the results to gauge whether they converge, diverge or complement each other (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was conducted in selected universities in Western Kenya. The region hosts diverse public and private institutions and provides a relevant context for examining identity development among SGM students within varying sociocultural environments.

The primary target of the study comprised SGM undergraduate students. The identities included, but were not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or other identities that are non-cisgender and non-heterosexual. Due to the sensitive nature of sexual orientation and gender identity and absence of official university records identifying students as SGM, a comprehensive sampling frame for this population was unavailable. Therefore, the exact number of SGM students within the selected universities could not be established. However, based on estimates provided by NYARWEK NGO; a community based organization that offers support and advocacy services to LGBTQ+ individuals in the region, approximately 200 SGM students were believed to be accessible for participation in the study. The estimate served as the accessible target population for the study.

Snowball sampling was employed to recruit SGM undergraduate students. It is a non-probability sampling technique well suited for reaching hidden or marginalized populations (Hassan, 2024). It involves recruiting participants through interconnected networks or chains where initial subjects are identified based on a study's criteria; after which they are invited to recommend additional individuals from the same population who may also serve as participants in the sample (Sarker & AL-Muaalemi, 2022). This approach was considered appropriate for this study because SGM undergraduate students constitute a hidden population, largely due to stigma, privacy concerns, and the sensitive nature of sexual and gender identity disclosure, which makes it difficult to establish a formal sampling frame. Initial participants who met the study inclusion criteria were identified through networks associated with NYARWEK NGO. These initial participants were then requested to refer other eligible participants within their social networks, allowing the researcher to progressively recruit additional respondents. The process progressed until no substantial new referrals were obtained. This technique enabled access to participants who might otherwise have been difficult to identify and recruit through conventional sampling methods. It was also considered the most feasible and ethically appropriate method for accessing the target population while protecting participant safety and confidentiality.

Census sampling was used to select the participating universities. Census sampling involves including all elements or units within a defined population in a study (Cantwell, 2008). The study therefore included all the 10 universities in Western Kenya. By so doing, the study aimed to capture a broad representation of the experiences of SGM students across the different higher education environments within the region. It was also able to capture a fuller picture of how differences in institutional support, campus social environments and access to resources might

shape the connection between social media use and identity development.

For data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered for quantitative data. The questionnaire comprised predominantly closed-ended items designed to generate standardized data on participants' social media use and identity development, while allowing limited open-ended responses where appropriate. Qualitative data on the other hand, were collected using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide with open-ended questions that elicited participants' lived experiences and perceptions of how social media influences their identity development. The integration of these instruments enabled the study to capture both measurable patterns and in-depth contextual insights, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of identity development among SGM undergraduate students.

Data collection process was conducted in a systematic, ethical and culturally sensitive manner in order to accommodate the unique needs and vulnerabilities of SGM students in university contexts. For the facilitation of data collection, the researcher sought an introductory letter from the Directorate of Post Graduate Studies of Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology that aided in obtaining a research permit from the National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Ethical clearance was also sought from MMUST Institutional and Ethics Review Committee. An engagement process with the local advocacy NGO, that is NYARWEK, was initiated in order to build trust and facilitate access to participants.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling through campus-based SGM networks. These initial contacts were instrumental in referring others within their networks. To ascertain confidentiality, recruitment notices did not explicitly reference sexual or gender identity but described the study as exploring student experiences with social media and identity development. For informed consent, each participant received an information sheet explaining the purpose, procedures, benefits, and potential risks of the study. The participants then signed and verbally agreed to an informed consent form before participating in the study. Data collection tools were administered to SGM participants at a time and place of their convenience, given that this is a hidden and vulnerable population and also for the purpose of adherence to ethical considerations. In administering the quantitative tool, participants completed the semi-structured questionnaire in person. The questionnaire included demographic items, social media use items and identity development scale. For qualitative data collection, 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 6-8 participants per group were conducted in safe, neutral

venues, facilitated by trained moderators familiar with SGM issues to investigate nuanced identity development and experiences related to social media. Data handling and security procedures ensured that completed questionnaires were stored securely with only the principal investigator and research assistants gaining access to them. Codes were also assigned to all the participants for the sake of maintaining anonymity.

Content validity was established through expert review. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with values exceeding the recommended threshold of .70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations were computed. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to assess the linear relationships between social media use and identity development. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis involving transcription, coding categorization and theme generation.

The study was guided by the following ethical considerations: voluntary participation and a provision for the participants to withdraw if they wished to at any given point and time without any negative consequences, confidentiality and anonymity in terms of strict data

protection measures that safeguarded the personal information of participants, avoidance of harm on the participants by providing access to psychological support for participants who expressed distress during the study and also handling sensitive topics with care and respect. For FGDs, verbal and /or written consent was obtained. The researchers were mindful of potential impact on participants' mental health and were also sensitive to the vulnerable nature of this population, given its marginalization in the country.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Response Rate and Demographic Information

A total of 142 SGM undergraduate students participated in the study, representing a response rate of 71%. Demographic characteristics of participants indicated that majority (57.7%) were aged between 22-25 years, followed by those aged between 18-25 years (33.1%). Participants aged over 25 years comprised 9.2% of the sample. This is thus a clear indication that most respondents were within the typical undergraduate range. This is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents**

| Age Bracket   | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| 18-21 Years   | 47            | 33.1           |
| 22-25 Years   | 82            | 57.7           |
| Over 25 Years | 13            | 9.2            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>142</b>    | <b>100.0</b>   |

In terms of assigned sex at birth, the male gender represented the majority of the study participants (62.0%) while the female gender was at 38.0%. This suggests that

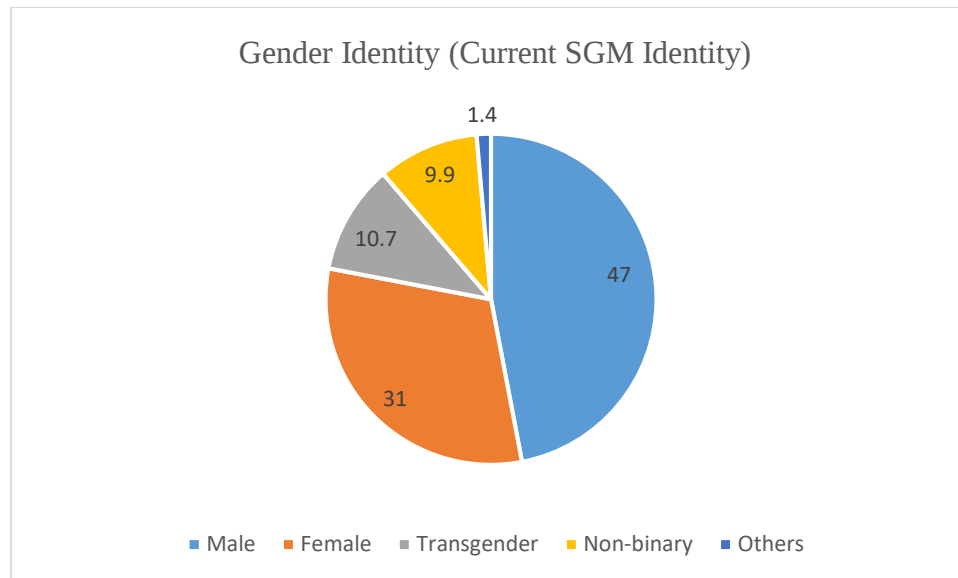
participants assigned male at birth constituted a larger proportion of the study sample as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Gender Assigned at Birth**

| Gender Assigned at Birth | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Male                     | 88            | 62.0           |
| Female                   | 54            | 38.0           |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>142</b>    | <b>100.0</b>   |

Concerning the gender identity of participants based on their current SGM status, a higher proportion of participants identified as male (47%), followed by female (31%), transgender (10.7%), non-binary (9.9%) and others (1.4%) respectively. This distribution reflects the diversity of gender identities represented in the study sample. Data

on sexual orientation of participants indicated that the largest proportion of participants identified as queer (24.6 %), followed by gay (23.9%) respectively. "Other" orientations came third (18.3 %), then bisexual (15.5 %) and lesbian (11.3%). Smaller proportions of respondents identified as pansexual (4.3%) and asexual (2.1%).



**Figure 1:** *Gender Identity (Current SGM Identity)*

## 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The influence of social media use patterns on identity development was examined through four dimensions: platform popularity, intensity of social media use, purpose of use and psychosocial functions of social media engagement.

Results indicated that participants engaged with multiple platforms of social media, with most of them utilizing more than one platform hence the reason for percentages exceeding 100%. WhatsApp was the most popular and widely used social media platform at 73.2%, followed by TikTok (57.7%); an indication for a strong preference for short-form video-based content, Instagram (39.4%) and YouTube (37.3%); platforms that are largely visual in nature and Facebook (33.8%). A smaller proportion of the respondents used Twitter/X (14.1%). The least used platform was Tinder (5.6%) among the category of 'other' platforms. The dominance of WhatsApp suggests the key role it plays in mediating online interaction and engagement within SGM students. Its widespread usage can also be attributed to the interactive and privacy-enhancing affordances which are invaluable to marginalized groups exploring their identity in potentially stigmatizing environments. The semi-private structure of WhatsApp affords users the ability to engage in closed, invitation only communication spaces through private chats and group messaging. This feature thus enables SGM students to interact, share experiences and explore identity-related issues in relatively secure digital contexts without fear of unwanted disclosure or surveillance. These affordances are especially significant in contexts where non-heteronormative identities may be stigmatized.

Other features and affordances of WhatsApp that favour interaction and communication among SGM students include the end-to-end encryption feature which enhances perceptions of safety and confidentiality, affordances of sharing multimedia content, for example voice notes, links and status updates may enhance identity expression. Participation in identity-affirming group chats or online support networks can offer opportunities for social validation and emotional support; aspects that are significant for positive identity development and mental well-being among minority populations.

The popularity of TikTok as the second most widely used social media platform among SGM students can be attributed to its features and affordances which enable users to create short form videos, algorithmic virality that curates personalized content guided by the users' interaction, preferences and interaction, interaction tools such as duets/stitches which enable users to react, reply or partner with others' content directly thus enabling community building as well as creative tools which enable users to curate their image through customized edited content that aid in the presentation of their idealized identities (Ettleman, 2021; Schellewald, 2023; Taylor, 2023). TikTok therefore becomes instrumental in identity affirmation of SGM students as they are able to access identity-affirming content, narratives related to sexual orientation, gender expression as well as the lived experiences of SGM individuals across diverse sociocultural contexts.

Instagram as a visually oriented platform, may support identity expression through curated self-presentation as well as symbolic presentation as reported by a participant SGM 002 (FGD 3):

*"I love fashion and design since I am a model. Instagram is thus my most favourite social media platform because I follow a lot on fashion, design and culture.*

These affordances provide opportunities for SGM users to communicate aspects of their gender identity or sexual orientation in nuanced or creative ways. On the other hand, You Tube may primarily serve as an informational and educational resource for SGM students seeking to understand identity-related concepts, mental health issues or coping strategies.

The lower usage of Facebook among SGM students indicates the rapidly evolving landscape of social media where emerging technologies inform the features and affordances of different platforms as well as shifting user preferences (Ranjan, 2024). Qualitative findings revealed that most participants reported shifting their interests from Facebook to other preferred social media platforms that served their needs without compromising their SGM identity SGM 005 (FGD1) reported:

*"...I have an account on Facebook but I don't use it so much since I created it. I discovered that Facebook is likely to 'out' me to family and friends who don't know my SGM identity because of the algorithmic exposure of my interests there..."*

These findings indicate a shift from the traditional social media platform, that is Facebook, to platforms that afford SGM students personalization where experiences resonate with their interests as well as algorithmic driven platforms that make use of algorithms in the dissemination of information and content. These findings are thus contrary to research that has shown Facebook as the most favourite and popular social media platform among mainstream populations but in agreement with a study conducted by Talbot et al. (2020) which revealed Facebook as a problematic platform as a result of context collapse. The context collapse phenomenon applies with Twitter/X platform –which recorded the lowest usage in this study– as it carries the possibility of ‘selling out’ the visibility of SGM students to audiences who are not aware of their SGM identities.

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings on types of social media platforms used by SGM students converged to indicate that they engage with multiple social media platforms to meet their needs, for example,

communication, identity exploration, access to affirming information and social support. The diverse affordances of different social media platforms may therefore collectively contribute to identity development processes and mental health outcomes among this population.

Concerning daily use and time spent on social media, a considerable proportion of respondents agreed that they use social media everyday (54.9%) and spend a significant amount of time (54.9%) on these platforms. The means of respondents who use social media every day and those who spend a significant amount of time on social media each day were 3.6 and 3.5 respectively. These findings suggest that social media forms an integral part of SGM students' daily routine. A small proportion of respondents (11.2%) reported strong disagreement, a clear indication that there was insignificant non-consumption within the sample. Overall, 84.2% of respondents reported moderate to high levels of social media use. Qualitative findings corroborated these results, with participants describing social media as an indispensable part of everyday life that provided opportunities for communication, entertainment, information seeking and connection with other SGM individuals. Participants also reported using multiple platforms simultaneously because each platform served distinct identity-related and social functions.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings showed that social media served multiple identity-related functions. Nearly half of the respondents reported that it facilitated exploration of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (45.8%), while 54.9% indicated that it helped them develop language needed to describe their identities. Half of the participants reported that positive representation of SGM individuals on social media affirmed their identities, thereby enhancing self-acceptance and confidence, and 50.7% intentionally followed content creators or pages reflecting their experiences. Furthermore, 52.2% had developed new friendships or support networks through social media, highlighting its role in fostering social connectedness. Qualitative accounts revealed that social media filled critical information gaps by providing educational resources, role models and supportive communities that were often unavailable in offline settings. Participants described learning about sexual orientation, gender identity, pronoun use, and coping strategies through online content and interactions with other SGM individuals. Table 3 summarizes the influence of social media use on identity development

**Table 3: Social Media Use and Identity Development**

| <b>Statement</b>                                                                            | <b>Strongly Agree</b> | <b>Agree</b> | <b>Neutral</b> | <b>Disagree</b> | <b>Strongly Disagree</b> | <b>Mean</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Social media helps me explore different aspects of my sexuality and/or gender identity      | 27 (19.0%)            | 38 (26.8%)   | 33 (23.2%)     | 29 (20.4%)      | 15 (10.6%)               | 3.2         |
| I feel more confident about my identity because of what I learn from others on social media | 23 (16.2%)            | 50 (35.2%)   | 30 (21.1%)     | 26 (18.3%)      | 13 (9.2%)                | 3.3         |
| Seeing positive representations of SGM individuals on social media affirms who I am.        | 30 (21.1%)            | 41 (28.9%)   | 47 (33.1%)     | 13 (9.2%)       | 11 (7.7%)                | 3.5         |
| Social media has helped me find language to describe my identity.                           | 25 (17.6%)            | 53 (37.3%)   | 28 (19.7%)     | 23 (16.2%)      | 13 (9.2%)                | 3.4         |
| I follow content creators or pages that reflect my identity or experiences.                 | 38 (26.8%)            | 34 (23.9%)   | 39 (27.5%)     | 9 (6.3%)        | 22 (15.5%)               | 3.4         |
| I have discovered supportive communities online that align with my identity.                | 21 (14.8%)            | 33 (23.2%)   | 55 (38.7%)     | 23 (16.2%)      | 10 (7.0%)                | 3.2         |
| I feel safer expressing parts of my identity online than in person.                         | 20 (14.1%)            | 34 (23.9%)   | 36 (25.4%)     | 25 (17.6%)      | 27 (19.0%)               | 3.0         |
| My online experiences have encouraged me to be more open about my identity offline.         | 21 (14.8%)            | 27 (19.0%)   | 39 (27.5%)     | 28 (19.7%)      | 27 (19.0%)               | 2.9         |
| I frequently reflect on who I am because of things I see or read on social media            | 14 (9.9%)             | 36 (25.4%)   | 28 (19.7%)     | 42 (29.6%)      | 22 (15.5%)               | 2.8         |
| Social media has played a key role in shaping how I understand myself.                      | 17 (12.0%)            | 54 (38.0%)   | 31 (21.8%)     | 9 (6.3%)        | 31 (21.8%)               | 3.1         |

Overall, 86.6% of respondents reported a moderate to high influence of social media on identity development as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Impact of Social Media on Identity Development**

| Social media and Identity Development | F          | %            |
|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| High (Agree-strongly agree)           | 52         | 36.6         |
| Moderate (Neutral)                    | 71         | 50.0         |
| Low (Strongly-Disagree)               | 19         | 13.4         |
| <b>Total</b>                          | <b>142</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Concerning identity authenticity expressed on social media by SGM students, an overall pattern from the findings summarised in Table 3 indicate high to low authenticity, with high authenticity (represented by Completely + Very) at 17.6%, moderate authenticity (37.3%) and low authenticity (represented by Slightly + Not at all) at 45.1%. Most of the respondents occupied the moderate to low authenticity range. These results suggest a partial identity expression on social media since a substantial proportion of 45.1% felt only slightly authentic or not authentic at all.

Further, participants explained that they carefully managed the visibility of their identities depending on the platform, audience and perceived safety. Identity curation emerged as a deliberate strategy for balancing authenticity with protection against stigma and unwanted disclosure. While some participants felt able to express themselves openly within supportive online communities, others restricted

identity disclosure because of concerns about discrimination or accidental exposure to family members or peers.

Although social media offered affirmation and social support, qualitative findings also highlighted its risks. Participants described experiences of hostile comments, exclusion, harassment, and identity-based discrimination, which often resulted in emotional distress and more cautious online behaviour for instance, selective self-disclosure and increased identity curation. These narratives complemented the quantitative finding that 74.6% of the respondents had experienced harassment, discrimination or other forms of identity-based negative feedback on social media, demonstrating the coexistence of affirmation and vulnerability in digital environments as presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Social Media and Identity Expression/Presentation**

| <b>Statement</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Completely authentic</b>             | <b>Very authentic</b>              | <b>Moderately authentic</b>       | <b>Slightly Authentic</b>       | <b>Not at all authentic</b>   | <b>Mean</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| How authentic (real) do you feel you can be about your SGM identity on social media                                   | 15 (10.6%)                              | 10 (7.0%)                          | 53 (37.3%)                        | 52 (36.6%)                      | 12 (8.5%)                     | 2.7         |
| <b>Statement</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Very Significant</b>                 | <b>Significant</b>                 | <b>Moderately significant</b>     | <b>Slightly significant</b>     | <b>Not at all significant</b> | <b>Mean</b> |
| To what extent do you curate or manage your SGM identity presentation on social media                                 | 15 (10.6%)                              | 15 (10.6%)                         | 63 (44.4%)                        | 41 (28.9%)                      | 8 (5.6%)                      | 2.9         |
| <b>Statement</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Very often</b>                       | <b>Often</b>                       | <b>Sometimes</b>                  | <b>Rarely</b>                   | <b>Never</b>                  | <b>Mean</b> |
| Have you ever received feedback or affirmation about your SGM identity on social media                                | 8 (5.6%)                                | 20 (14.1%)                         | 72 (50.7%)                        | 28 (19.7%)                      | 14 (9.9%)                     | 2.9         |
| <b>Statement</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Very Significant positive impact</b> | <b>Significant positive impact</b> | <b>Moderately positive impact</b> | <b>Slightly positive impact</b> | <b>No impact</b>              | <b>Mean</b> |
| How does positive feedback on social media impact your self-esteem related to your SGM identity                       | 21 (14.8%)                              | 24 (16.9%)                         | 36 (25.4%)                        | 47 (33.1%)                      | 14 (9.9%)                     | 2.9         |
| <b>Statement</b>                                                                                                      |                                         | <b>Yes</b>                         |                                   |                                 | <b>No</b>                     |             |
| Have you ever received negative feedback, harassment, or discrimination related to your SGM identity on social media? |                                         | 106 (74.6%)                        |                                   |                                 | 36 (25.4%)                    |             |
|                                                                                                                       | <b>Very Significant negative impact</b> | <b>Significant negative impact</b> | <b>Moderately negative impact</b> | <b>Slightly negative impact</b> | <b>No impact</b>              | <b>Mean</b> |
| If yes, what was the impact                                                                                           | 10 (7.0%)                               | 18 (12.7%)                         | 30 (21.1%)                        | 44 (31.0%)                      | 40 (28.2%)                    | 2.4         |

### 4.3 Inferential Statistics

The study sought to determine the relationship between social media use and identity development, as guided by a null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship

between social media use and identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority students in universities in Western Kenya. The strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables were therefore determined using Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) and the level of statistical significance tested at an alpha level of 0.05 as presented in Table 6.

**Table 6: Correlation between Social Media Use and Identity Development**

|             | Value | Standard Error | p-value<br>(Significance) | r <sup>2</sup> |
|-------------|-------|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| Pearson's R | 0.413 | 0.064          | 0.001*                    | 0.171          |

The findings showed a moderate positive correlation between social media use and identity development ( $r=0.413$ ). The analysis further showed that the relationship was statistically significant, as the associated p-value was less than the established significance level of 0.05 ( $p<0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2= 0.171$ ) reveals that social media use accounts for only 17.1% of the variance in identity development.

The rejection of the null hypothesis indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between social media use and identity development among SGM students in universities in Western Kenya. This positive correlation suggests that increased engagement with social media is associated with higher levels of identity development and may therefore contribute meaningfully to the process of identity exploration, expression and understanding among SGM students. Basing on Affordances Theory, social media affordances such as visibility, identity experimentation and access to affirming communities, may facilitate identity exploration and consolidation. These findings are in line with studies that have positively correlated social media use with identity development (Avci, et al., 2025; Noon, et al., 2024; Babu & Ghafar, 2025).

However, the moderate strength of the relationship ( $r^2 =0.171$ ) also implies that social media use is not the only determinant of identity development, and that other contextual or environmental factors beyond digital engagement may influence identity outcomes among SGM students. It thus suggests partial explanatory power and not determinism. From a Minority Stress Theory perspective, social media may serve as a coping and resilience resource by reducing isolation and providing opportunities for identity affirmation

Both quantitative and qualitative findings of this study highlight the duality of social media as both a supportive environment that facilitates identity development and a space where identity-related risks such as prejudice/stigma and discrimination may occur (McConnell, et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Craig, et al., 2021). The findings thus emphasize the complex influence of social media on the identity development of SGM students.

In light of these findings, social media emerges as a double-edged context in the identity development of SGM

students. While its supportive affordances cannot be overlooked, the persistence of identity-related vulnerabilities emphasizes the need for a more intentional and protective digital ecosystem.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between social media use and identity development among Sexual and Gender Minority undergraduate students in universities in Western Kenya. The findings indicate that social media constitutes an increasingly important social environment within which SGM students explore, negotiate, express and make sense of their identities. The quantitative findings revealed a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between social media use and identity development ( $r=0.413$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), with social media use accounting for 17.1% of the variance in identity development. This finding suggests that greater engagement with social media is associated with more developed identity outcomes among SGM students, while also indicating that social media is only one of several factors shaping identity development.

The qualitative findings provide important insight into the processes underlying this relationship. Participants described social media as a source of identity-related information, opportunities to encounter positive representations of SGM identities, connection with like-minded individuals, community formation and emotional affirmation. Social media therefore extended the identity development environment beyond the immediate physical settings available to students and enabled participants to encounter language, experiences and communities that could support greater understanding and exploration of their identities. The findings further indicate that students did not engage with social media passively, rather, they actively selected platforms and audiences according to the degree of safety, privacy, personalization and identity affirmation they offered.

At the same time, the findings reveal that identity development through social media occurs within a context of considerable vulnerability. Although social media enabled identity expression and connection, 74.6% of participants reported navigating challenges such as online

harassment, negative feedback, identity concealment and selective self-presentation arising from stigma and discrimination within the broader socio-cultural environment. These findings suggest that social media functions as both a resource for identity affirmation and a space where offline social inequalities are reproduced. The study further concludes that the influence of social media on identity development is shaped by the socio-cultural and legal context within which SGM students live. Consequently, evidence generated from Western settings cannot be assumed to apply directly to Kenya. By providing empirical evidence from Kenyan universities, this study contributes to the limited African scholarship on social media and SGM identity development and highlights the need for contextually responsive interventions that promote safe digital engagement and psychosocial well-being.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following are recommended:

1. Universities should strengthen institutional support systems by establishing inclusive counselling services, peer support initiatives and digital literacy programmes that equip students to use social media safely while mitigating risks such as cyberbullying, harassment and identity-based discrimination.
2. University administrators and student affairs departments should develop policies and awareness programmes that foster inclusive campus environments, reduce stigma and promote respect for diversity. Such initiatives would enable SGM students to engage in healthy identity development both online and offline.
3. Mental health practitioners working within universities should incorporate social media experiences into counselling and psychosocial support programmes, recognizing both the benefits and potential risks associated with online identity exploration among SGM students.
4. Future research should extend this work by examining the long-term influence of social media on identity development using longitudinal designs, exploring experiences of SGM students in other regions of Kenya and Africa, and investigating how specific platform affordances and institutional environments shape identity development and well-being.

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