



Caught Between Control and Neglect: Exploring the Psychological Impact of Toxic Parenting, Social Media Use and Suicidal Ideation among Nigerian Adolescents

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Abstract

Suicide among adolescents is a growing concern globally, with increasing rates reported in Nigeria. While toxic parenting and social media use have been linked to mental health challenges and suicidal ideation among adolescents, the lived experiences of young people navigating these issues remain underexplored within the Nigerian context. Therefore, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted to explore how toxic parenting and social media use contribute to suicidal ideation among school-aged adolescents in Lagos State, Nigeria. A total of 24 participants were recruited from both private and public secondary schools in Lagos State using a purposive sampling strategy. Participants included 16 students (aged 14–16), 5 teachers (aged 28–41), and 3 counsellors (aged 37–39), with gender balance across the student group and a female majority among the adult participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Three key themes emerged: (1) Strict Parents, where participants reported verbal and emotional abuse, maltreatment by step-parents or guardians, parental comparison, and the imposition of unwanted academic choices; (2) Uninvolved Parents, reflecting emotional and physical neglect, provision of material needs without emotional presence, and resistance to external discipline from schools; and (3) Identity Crisis, driven by cultural dissonance, negative influence of social media, low self-esteem, and peer-related conflicts. This study highlights the profound psychological burden Nigerian adolescents face due to toxic parenting and social media pressures, underscoring the urgent need for school-based psychosocial interventions and family-focused mental health support systems.

Keywords: Adolescent, Toxic Parenting, Social Media Use, Suicidal Ideation

Introduction

Suicidal ideation, characterised by persistent thoughts of self-harm, represents a critical and expanding public health concern, particularly affecting adolescents who are navigating pivotal psychological and social developmental stages. The World Health Organisation (2023) highlights the severity of this issue, noting that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death globally among individuals aged 15 to 19. While often associated with high-income nations, suicide is a pervasive worldwide phenomenon, with approximately 73% of cases occurring in low- and middle-income countries. In Nigeria, this escalating mental health crisis disproportionately impacts adolescents, yet remains significantly under-researched and largely concealed due to prevailing cultural norms of silence, stigmatisation, and systematic underreporting of adolescent distress (Owokotomo, 2024; Fadele, et al., 2024;



Unyime-Young, 2025). The origins of adolescent mental distress frequently extend beyond individual psychopathology, deeply embedding themselves within systemic family dysfunctions and societal pressures (Kirkbride, et al., 2024). Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968) posits adolescence as a crucial period for identity formation, during which individuals confront the fundamental conflict of identity versus role confusion. However, in Nigeria, this essential process of identity development is often impeded by detrimental parenting practices, particularly prevalent among in-school adolescents. Such maladaptive parental behaviours, termed "toxic parenting," encompass a spectrum of actions including excessive control, emotional neglect, psychological manipulation, and the invalidation of a child's emotions and autonomy (Duray-Parmentier et al., 2022; Harahap & Daulay, 2023). These practices frequently manifest as parents imposing rigid expectations, especially regarding academic and career choices, thereby pressuring adolescents to conform to familial aspirations at the expense of their personal interests and inherent competencies.

This form of control aligns with what Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) identifies as "autonomy-thwarting environments." These are contexts that actively suppress an individual's fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For Nigerian adolescents, the repercussions of such suppression are considerable. Parents frequently impose career paths, often prioritising fields like medicine, law, or engineering, driven by socio-economic pressures, the pursuit of social prestige, or the fulfilment of their unachieved aspirations (Pfungst, 2015). This practice erodes adolescents' sense of agency and cultivates identity conflict, a profound psychological struggle between their innate desires and externally imposed identities (Manago et al., 2025). Adolescents ensnared in this dynamic find themselves unable to assert their individuality and are often subjected to emotional or verbal chastisement when they attempt to do so, leading to emotional withdrawal and feelings of isolation. Within these environments, emotional suppression becomes a normalised coping mechanism. Adolescents are socialised to avoid expressing vulnerability or dissent, frequently under the guise of demonstrating respect, maintaining discipline, or adhering to religious morality (Aruoture & Adegoke, 2024; Okonkwo & Emmanuel, 2024). This is particularly evident among boys, who are often conditioned to conceal their emotions, thereby perpetuating a cycle of internalised distress. Over time, chronic emotional suppression has been empirically linked to an elevated risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Afolabi & Egbuchulem, 2024; Thompson et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2024).

Suicide among adolescents is increasingly linked to their interactions with social media, where many seek emotional validation, belonging, and identity exploration. In contexts where traditional family structures fail to provide psychological safety, social media



becomes both a refuge and a risk. As Balogun and Aruoture (2024) and Goodman (2025) argue, social media is a double-edged tool: it offers connection and self-expression but also intensifies vulnerability to social comparison, cyberbullying, and validation-seeking behaviours. Nigerian adolescents increasingly use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp to escape parental surveillance and to construct alternate identities that reflect their suppressed emotions and aspirations (Ngwainmbi, 2024). This online self-construction is often fragile, with adolescents measuring their self-worth through likes, comments, and follower counts, leading to externalised self-esteem and emotional dependence on virtual feedback loops (Balogun & Aruoture, 2024; Schreurs et al., 2024). Such dynamics can undermine emotional regulation, heighten social anxiety, and exacerbate suicidal thoughts, especially when adolescents experience rejection, ridicule, or exclusion in virtual spaces (Jones, 2024).

The growing prevalence of adolescent mental health challenges, including suicidal ideation, is deeply embedded in a complex interplay of cultural, familial, and societal factors that have yet to be thoroughly investigated within the Nigerian research landscape. Within numerous Nigerian families, reverence for elders is considered paramount; consequently, questioning parental authority is often perceived as an act of rebellion or disrespect, irrespective of the adolescent's psychological distress (Ojo, 2024). Furthermore, religious ideologies frequently spiritualize mental illness or frame suicidal thoughts as moral failings, thereby discouraging open dialogue and the pursuit of professional assistance. As a result, many adolescents experience a form of psychological entrapment, their suffering rendered invisible by both familial and societal denial (Ogundipe et al., 2022). Despite these concerning dynamics, empirical research in Nigeria remains limited, particularly studies that explore, in a culturally nuanced manner, the psychological connections between toxic parenting, social media dependence, and suicidal ideation. Most existing studies lack the requisite depth to adequately examine how adolescents internally and socially navigate these multifaceted tensions. This highlights a pressing need for qualitative and contextualised research that prioritises adolescent voices, investigates lived experiences, and critically examines the psychosocial mechanisms contributing to the decline in mental health within Nigerian schools.

This study seeks to explore how varying parenting styles impact the emotional well-being and suicidal ideation of adolescents within Nigerian secondary schools. It also investigates the role of social media use in shaping adolescents' identity and self-esteem among adolescents. By examining these synergistic interactions, the study aims to uncover how familial and digital environments collectively influence the mental health outcomes of Nigerian adolescents.



Methods

Study Design and Setting

This qualitative study utilised an exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm to understand the subjective experiences of adolescents, teachers, and school counsellors concerning parenting styles, social media addiction, and suicidal ideation. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how social and familial dynamics interact with digital behaviours to influence adolescent mental health. The research was conducted in public and private secondary schools within Educational District III and Educational District VI of Lagos State, Nigeria. Lagos was chosen due to its dynamic urban environment, which presents a relevant context for examining parenting practices, emotional isolation, peer pressure, and social media exposure among adolescents. The selection of these two districts aimed to capture a diverse range of schools, reflecting variations in socioeconomic status and school governance, and providing insight into these variables within everyday school and social contexts.

Population and Sampling Approach

The study included students, teachers, and school counsellors from selected secondary schools in Lagos State, all chosen specifically for their direct involvement with adolescent well-being. Student participants consisted of 16 individuals (8 males, 8 females) aged 14 to 16 years, with a mean age of 14.88 years. They participated in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), as this age group often grapples with critical developmental issues like identity formation, peer relationships, academic pressure, and exposure to digital environments such as social media. Additionally, eight Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with teachers and counsellors. This group included five teachers (four females, one male) and three counsellors (two males, one female), aged between 28 and 41 years. Their professional roles and regular interaction with adolescents provided valuable perspectives on the study's core variables: parenting styles, social media use, and suicidal ideation.

A multistage sampling technique was used to select participants. Initially, two educational districts, Districts 3 and 6, were chosen through systematic random sampling to ensure geographical diversity. Within each district, four secondary schools were purposively selected, balancing between public and private institutions (two of each type per district). Finally, convenience sampling was employed to select eligible participants from these identified schools. Inclusion criteria for students required active school engagement and being within the specified age range, while teachers and counsellors needed to be familiar with adolescent-related psychosocial issues. Exclusion criteria were applied to any student



with a documented emotional or cognitive impairment that could affect participation, as well as staff members not directly involved in student affairs. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, specifically after the sixth key informant interview, ensuring that no new insights or themes emerged and that the final sample size was sufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Data collection

Before data collection, ethical approval was secured from the institutional ethics committee in Lagos State responsible for educational research. Access to the study sites was granted by the respective school authorities. Each participant was provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their voluntary participation, alongside assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before any interviews commenced. The primary data collection instruments were a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide and a Key Informant Interview (KII) guide, both researcher-developed and designed to explore the influence of parenting styles and social media addiction on suicidal ideation in adolescents. These guides featured open-ended questions with prompts to encourage detailed responses.

Participant recruitment and data collection were facilitated by school principals and guidance counsellors, who acted as gatekeepers. These personnel identified eligible participants based on the inclusion criteria and initiated contact, introducing the study. To uphold ethical standards and prevent coercion, they received training to emphasise the voluntary nature of participation, assuring students and staff that declining involvement would not affect their academic or professional standing. Interviews were conducted face-to-face. While most participant agreed to audio recording, others opted for written documentation of their responses to maintain confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and took place in private school settings to ensure participant comfort and privacy. Non-verbal cues and contextual observations were also documented to enrich the data. Two trained research assistants supported the data collection by coordinating interviews and distributing questionnaires to student participants. The study strictly adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong et al., 2007), ensuring methodological rigour, ethical compliance, and transparency throughout the data collection process.

Data analysis

Data from the interviews underwent thematic content analysis, following the systematic framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen to rigorously



identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning pertinent to the study's research questions. The analysis involved six sequential phases, ensuring both methodological rigour and transparency. Initially, the lead researcher immersed themselves in the data, thoroughly reading interview transcripts multiple times and reviewing available audio recordings. This crucial step facilitated deep familiarity with the nuances of each participant's narrative. To ensure accuracy and preserve original context, transcriptions were completed verbatim. In the subsequent phase, initial codes were generated by manually identifying and highlighting significant features within the data. These codes specifically captured responses related to parenting influences, adolescents' social media use, and expressions of suicidal ideation. This systematic coding was applied across the entire dataset to prevent any meaningful data from being overlooked.

The researchers then proceeded to identify patterns among these codes, organising them into potential themes and subthemes. These thematic clusters emerged from recurring ideas, emotional tones, and participant expressions that directly aligned with the research objectives. The evolving thematic structure was continually reviewed and refined by comparing coded extracts across interviews, ensuring internal coherence and representativeness. Adjustments were made to enhance clarity and alignment with the dataset. Once solidified, the themes were clearly defined and named, aiming to unambiguously capture the essence of participants' experiences. Finally, the thematic findings were compiled into a detailed report. To add depth and authenticity to the interpretation, verbatim quotes were integrated to support each theme.

Rigour and reflexivity

Ensuring rigour in qualitative research is crucial, especially when addressing sensitive topics like adolescent suicide. In this study, rigour was maintained through several strategies that enhanced the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Triangulation was achieved by gathering data from varied participant groups, including students, teachers, and school counsellors from both public and private secondary schools. This diversity offered a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The inclusion of verbatim participant quotes further validated the authenticity of the narratives and ensured that the voices of participants were central to the findings. To enhance credibility, member checking was employed. Preliminary themes and interpretations were shared with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of their experiences and perspectives. This helped reduce researcher bias and validated the study's conclusions. Peer debriefing sessions with fellow researchers and mental health



professionals also strengthened the objectivity of the analysis by incorporating external feedback and diverse interpretations.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, ensuring a systematic and transparent approach to coding and theme development. All stages of data collection and analysis were well documented, with iterative reviews to refine emerging codes and themes. Reflexivity was carefully maintained throughout the research process. The lead researcher kept a reflexive journal to record personal thoughts, assumptions, and emotional reactions. This self-awareness was essential in mitigating the influence of the researcher's background and professional training on data interpretation. Additionally, the research team included experienced qualitative researchers and two postgraduate clinical psychologists and a developmental psychologist with a deep understanding of Nigeria's cultural and educational contexts. This cultural sensitivity, particularly concerning stigma around suicide, ensured that data interpretation was grounded in the socio-cultural realities of the participants, enhancing the depth, relevance, and ethical integrity of the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ministry of Education, Lagos State, through the Policy, Planning, Research and Statistics Department (MB&SE/PPR&S/R&S-EMIS/01/34/VI317), in compliance with institutional and national standards. School authorities also provided formal permission to access participants. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks through information sheets and verbal explanations. Emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained through signed forms or, for minors, verbal assent alongside parental or guardian consent. Students received age-appropriate explanations, while teachers and school counsellors provided written consent.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each participant was assigned a unique identifier, and all personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Interviews were conducted privately within school premises or at a location chosen by participants, with no school staff present to avoid undue influence. Data was securely stored, and access was restricted to the research team. Given the sensitive nature of suicide-related topics, a trained mental health professional was available to offer emotional support during or after interviews. Participants were encouraged to contact the research team at any point for clarification or concerns. These ethical procedures were implemented to uphold the dignity,



rights, and emotional well-being of participants while ensuring the credibility and integrity of the research process in this sensitive area of inquiry.

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

S/N	Interview	Role	Age	Gender	Class	Department	School Type
P1	FGD	Student	15	Female	SSS3	Art	Private
P2	FGD	Student	16	Male	SSS2	Science	Private
P3	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS3	Science	Private
P4	FGD	Student	15	Male	SSS3	Commercial	Private
P5	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS2	Science	Private
P6	FGD	Student	15	Male	SSS3	Science	Private
P7	FGD	Student	15	Male	SSS2	Arts	Private
P8	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS3	Commercial	Private
P9	KII	Counsellor	38	Female		Guidance/Counsel.	Private
P10	KII	Teacher	41	Male		Teacher	Private
P11	KII	Teacher	28	Female		Teacher	Private
P12	KII	Teacher	31	Female		Teacher	Private
P13	FGD	Student	15	Female	SSS2	Science	Public
P14	FGD	Student	16	Male	SSS3	Arts	Public
P15	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS2	Science	Public
P16	FGD	Student	16	Male	SSS2	Commercial	Public
P17	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS3	Science	Public
P18	FGD	Student	15	Male	SSS2	Arts	Public



P19	FGD	Student	14	Female	SSS3	Science	Public
P20	FGD	Student	16	Male	SSS3	Commercial	Public
P21	KII	Counsellor	37	Female		Guidance/Counsel.	Public
P22	KII	Counsellor	39	Male		Guidance/Counsel.	Public
P23	KII	Teacher	28	Female		Teacher	Public
P24	KII	Teacher	29	Female		Teacher	Public

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the 24 participants involved in the study, comprising students, teachers, and counsellors from both private and public secondary schools in Lagos State. The student participants (n = 16) were aged between 14 and 16 years, balanced across gender and academic classes ranging from Senior Secondary School 2 (SSS2) to Senior Secondary School 3 (SSS3), with diverse departmental representation including Science, Arts, and Commercial studies. The adult participants included 5 teachers (aged 28–41 years) and 3 counsellors (aged 37–39 years), with a gender distribution reflecting a majority of females among teachers and counsellors. Both private (n = 12) and public (n = 12) schools were equally represented, ensuring a broad perspective on the psychosocial issues explored in the study.

Table 2: Themes, Subthemes, and Descriptions of Participants’ Experiences

Theme	Subthemes	Description
Strict Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbal and Emotional Abuse - Maltreatment by Step-Parents/Guardians - Parental Comparison - Imposition of Academic Choices 	Harsh parenting styles, including criticism, emotional neglect, and coercion, contribute to low self-worth, emotional withdrawal, and reliance on social media for validation.
Uninvolved Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional and Physical Neglect - Material Provision Without Emotional Presence - Resistance to External Discipline 	Absence of parental support and rejection of external intervention leave adolescents emotionally unstable and dependent on peers or online sources for guidance.



<p>Identity Crisis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural and Social Media Influences - Low Self-Esteem - Peer Conflicts 	<p>Conflicting expectations from culture, family, and social media result in identity confusion, low self-esteem, and emotional turmoil among adolescents.</p>
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Strict Parents

Strict Parents emerged as a significant factor contributing to emotional distress and potential suicidal thoughts among adolescents, as reported by nine participants. This theme was particularly prevalent among informants from private schools. The participants described how strict parenting, including verbal and emotional abuse, maltreatment from step-parents or guardians, academic coercion and loss of autonomy.

Verbal and Emotional Abuse

A recurring concern among participants was the prevalence of verbal and emotional abuse from strict parents. Adolescents described how harsh words, constant criticism, and emotional neglect from their parents led to feelings of low self-worth and emotional isolation. This type of abuse was reported to have long-lasting effects on their mental health, fostering a sense of hopelessness and emotional withdrawal. Several participants shared experiences of being subjected to harsh words and emotional neglect by their parents. One Key informant, a guidance counsellor in a private school, described a situation where a student exhibited signs of emotional withdrawal. She said:

I noticed one of our science students in SS2 seemed unusually quiet and distant. When I asked her privately, she broke down and said her mother called her useless and a failure before she left for school. This kind of emotional abuse can make children feel like they have no value, and for some, it may push them to harmful thoughts." (P9)

This statement demonstrates how seemingly “normalised” parental language can be psychologically damaging, especially when adolescents are in vulnerable developmental stages. The student’s reaction highlights a cycle of emotional invalidation that fosters internalised feelings of worthlessness and emotional fatigue. A similar experience was shared by an FGD participant who felt emotionally crushed by constant comparisons with his older sibling:

My mom always compares me to my older brother, who is a medical student. She tells me I am a failure because I struggle with my science subjects. No matter how hard I try, she only



sees my mistakes. I feel like nothing I do will ever be good enough, and most days, I just want to disappear. (P2)

This adolescent's narrative captures the deep psychological distress caused by parental comparison. Such comparisons erode self-esteem and contribute to identity confusion, especially when adolescents feel unseen for their strengths. For some, these experiences spark suicidal ideation or the urge to "disappear" as a form of escape.

Maltreatment by Step-Parents

Some adolescents expressed a deep sense of not belonging in blended families due to mistreatment from step-parents. These experiences often reinforced emotional alienation and psychological exhaustion. The issue of maltreatment by step-parents also surfaced in the interviews. An FGD recounted the hostility he faced at home, which made him feel like a perpetual outsider:

My stepmother always reminds me that I am not her child. She makes sure I do all the house chores while her biological children rest. It feels like no matter how much I try to please her, it is never enough. Sometimes, I just want to disappear. (P4)

This reveals the emotional exhaustion and sense of displacement that some adolescents experience in blended families. The constant reminder of "not belonging" fosters emotional alienation, which in turn may worsen mental health conditions. A counsellor working in a public commercial school reinforced this point, explaining how emotional neglect by guardians often leaves adolescents in a fragile psychological state:

Many of the adolescents I counsel report feeling isolated and unwanted because of how their step-parents treat them. This emotional neglect can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and sometimes even self-harm. Adolescents need to feel loved and accepted in their homes to thrive emotionally. (P23)

Academic Coercion and Loss of Autonomy

Another source of psychological distress was the imposition of academic paths by strict parents, often in direct opposition to the adolescents' passions and interests. This left many students feeling trapped, voiceless, and unfulfilled. One female student shared her experience of being forced to abandon her passion for literature:

I wanted to study literature, but my parents forced me into the commercial department. They believe that being an accountant is better for my future, but I feel stuck and unfulfilled. Sometimes, I wonder if there is any point in trying if my voice does not matter. (P8)



The psychological consequences of this academic imposition are profound, as adolescents who feel unheard or dismissed by their parents often turn to social media for support and validation. In sum, adolescents in private schools reported feeling more emotionally burdened by strict parenting than their public-school peers. These accounts demonstrate that for many adolescents, particularly in private school settings, strict parenting is not just about discipline it is a source of deep psychological trauma.

Uninvolved Parenting

Uninvolved parenting, discovered as a theme in this study, was strongly reflected in participants' narratives as a significant driver of emotional distress, behavioural challenges, and social withdrawal among adolescents. Several accounts revealed that the absence of parental engagement, whether due to work pressure, emotional unavailability, or apathy, leaves adolescents struggling to meet their emotional and developmental needs.

Emotional Neglect and the Feeling of Invisibility

A dominant sub-theme that emerged from the data is the sense of being emotionally abandoned and invisible within the home. Respondents frequently described parents who, although physically present at times, were emotionally detached or unavailable. This disconnect was experienced as deeply painful, especially during critical periods of growth and self-discovery. Adolescents in these situations often report feeling invisible or neglected, as their emotional needs are overlooked or dismissed. One school counsellor shared how the lack of parental attention in students' lives.

Many of my students come to school looking tired and withdrawn. When I take the time to ask what's wrong, I often find that their parents are too occupied with work or personal issues to pay attention to their emotional needs. These students feel like they are living in the shadows at home, no one asks how they are doing, and no one listens when they try to speak. As a result, they turn to social media or their peers for validation, which sometimes exposes them to harmful influences. (P9)

The counselor's account highlights how adolescents are left to fend for themselves emotionally, relying on external sources, such as social media or friends, to fill the emotional gap. These environments create fertile ground for unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as seeking validation from peers or online platforms, where the feedback may not always be constructive or positive. Similarly, a student from a private school shared a personal account of how her parents' absence and focus on their work left her feeling emotionally neglected.



My mom is always traveling for work, and my dad is never home. I can go days without seeing either of them. Whenever I try to talk about how I feel, they just tell me they're working hard for my future. But what about now? I feel like no one really cares. That's why I spend so much time with my phone it's the only place I feel heard. (P1)

This student's statement further reveals the disconnect between material support and emotional availability. While her parents may provide for her future, her immediate emotional needs are being neglected, leaving her to seek connection elsewhere. The feeling of being unheard and unsupported is a common thread among adolescents in these circumstances, leading them to externalise their emotional needs. These accounts consistently demonstrate that emotional neglect, even in homes with adequate material provision, leaves adolescents feeling isolated and unimportant.

Material Provision Without Emotional Presence

Another prominent sub-theme that emerged is the misconception that providing material needs alone is sufficient for healthy adolescent development. Several key informants drew attention to the emotional neglect that exists even in economically privileged households. While these families may ensure their children are well-fed, clothed, and enrolled in prestigious schools, many fail to offer the emotional presence and engagement necessary for the adolescent's psychological and emotional growth. This dissonance, where financial support is plentiful but emotional involvement is lacking, often leaves adolescents feeling abandoned, misunderstood, and emotionally disconnected from their caregivers. A teacher working in a private science school emphasised how adolescents from wealthy families are not immune to emotional suffering.

I work with students from affluent backgrounds who have everything they need materially but feel emotionally abandoned. I once counselled a brilliant science student who had severe anxiety because his parents were too busy to engage with him. It's not about providing financial support these kids need emotional presence. These parents are emotionally distanced from their children (P10)

Despite excelling academically or having access to elite resources, many are silently battling internal distress due to the emotional neglect they experience from parents who prioritise work or social status over connection with their children. The narrative of a 17-year-old male student from a private science school further reinforces this pattern. Despite attending a reputable school and presumably having access to educational resources, the lack of emotional and academic support from his father has had a profound impact on his motivation and sense of self-worth.



My dad doesn't care about my schoolwork. When the school calls him about my grades, he says it's the teacher's job to fix it, not his. I've stopped expecting anything from him. It feels like he's given up on me. (P2)

Student's feeling of being "given up on" reflects the psychological damage that occurs when children feel they are not worth their parents' time or concern beyond financial provision. Adolescents consistently voiced that material goods and comfort cannot fill the emotional gap left by distant or indifferent parents. Whether in low-income or affluent households, the absence of emotional presence fosters a profound sense of abandonment, which, if unaddressed, can escalate into anxiety, suicidal thoughts, academic disengagement, and long-term emotional instability.

Parental Denial and Resistance to External Support

A further sub-theme that emerged prominently from the data is the pattern of parental denial and resistance to external interventions, particularly those initiated by schools, counsellors, or mental health professionals. Respondents highlighted how many well-meaning attempts to offer guidance, emotional support, or corrective measures are met with rejection or outright hostility by parents who either deny their child's struggles or deflect responsibility. This denial not only perpetuates emotional neglect but also blocks potential avenues of healing and growth for the adolescent. A counsellor in a public school described how parental resistance hinders the efforts of professionals to intervene and support students.

We try to offer support and corrective measures, but many parents refuse to acknowledge that their child needs guidance. I've had cases where parents dismiss our concerns, insisting their child can do no wrong. This attitude prevents us from helping the student, leaving them without structure and direction, and often worsening behavioural issues that could have been addressed early through collaboration and open communication (P21)

This statement reveals a broader systemic problem: when adults who are in a position to help are prevented from doing so by defensive or indifferent parents, the adolescent is left in a liminal space of unmet emotional and behavioural needs. Denial by caregivers does not eliminate the issues it merely pushes them underground, often leading to more serious psychological and academic consequences.

A female student further underscores the emotional damage caused by such parental attitudes.



My teacher once called my mom to talk about how sad I was feeling, but she just said I was fine. At home, she doesn't even ask how I am. I've learned not to expect anyone to care, so I keep things to myself or talk to people instead. (P19)

This Participant words reflect the long-term psychological effects of being repeatedly dismissed feelings of invisibility, mistrust, and a learned helplessness in seeking adult support. When external support systems are blocked and internal familial care is absent, adolescents are left to navigate emotional landscapes alone. This increases the risk of emotional dysregulation, social withdrawal, or dependence on virtual communities that may not offer constructive or safe coping mechanisms.

Identity Crisis

Identity crisis emerged as a recurring theme across the interviews, with key informants emphasising how adolescents grapple with self-worth and identity formation. This struggle is particularly pronounced in the context of rapid globalisation, where cultural expectations often clash with personal aspirations. Many adolescents experience confusion about who they are and where they belong, a condition worsened by social media's pervasive influence. Social media not only exposes adolescents to unrealistic standards but also fosters constant comparisons, deepening feelings of inadequacy and intensifying their identity struggles.

A teacher working in a public science school highlighted how social media amplifies identity conflicts by creating pressure to conform to idealised images:

Adolescents today face tremendous pressure to define who they are. Social media platforms portray an unrealistic version of life—perfect bodies, luxurious lifestyles, and constant happiness. For adolescents already struggling with their sense of self, this makes them question their value and identity. Some of them even change their behaviour to fit into these artificial moulds, leading to identity confusion and emotional distress. (P23)

Low Self-Esteem

A recurring sub-theme throughout the interviews was the impact of low self-esteem, which many adolescents described as a direct consequence of identity crises exacerbated by their online experiences. Participants revealed the deep insecurities they grapple with about their appearance, intelligence, financial status, and social acceptance. These internal struggles are often intensified by constant comparisons to idealised images and lifestyles on social media platforms. As a result, adolescents with low self-esteem tend to exhibit signs of anxiety, self-consciousness, and emotional withdrawal, which in turn influence their mental health and daily interactions. A student from a private school offered a



poignant account of how her self-perception is negatively shaped by social media comparisons.

When I go online, I see girls who look perfect better skin, nicer clothes, and more followers. It makes me feel like I'm not pretty enough or smart enough. Sometimes, I avoid posting my pictures because I'm scared people will judge me. It's like everyone online is living a perfect life, and I start to wonder what's wrong with me. Even when people compliment me in real life, I don't believe them because I've already convinced myself I'm not good enough. (P1)

This reflects the internalisation of self-doubt and the erosion of self-worth due to digital comparison. Her case is not isolated. A teacher confirmed these patterns, emphasising the broader psychosocial consequences:

Adolescents with low self-esteem often withdraw socially and struggle with feelings of inferiority. Social media worsens this by constantly reminding them of what they lack. I've worked with students who became more anxious and isolated because they felt they didn't measure up to the image they saw online. For some, it starts with comparing looks or clothes, but it quickly turns into questioning their entire identity, whether they are worthy, smart, or lovable. It's a silent crisis that builds over time. (P23)

Peer Conflicts

Closely related to low self-esteem is the sub-theme of peer conflicts, which several respondents attributed to the fragile sense of identity that many adolescents struggle with. The pressure to maintain an ideal online image, gain social validation, and conform to peer expectations often results in misunderstandings, jealousy, and competition. These conflicts, frequently inflamed by social media dynamics, undermine adolescents' sense of security and belonging within their social circles.

A 14-year-old female student from a public arts school explained how the pursuit of validation online often disrupts friendships and fosters resentment:

Sometimes, my friends and I fight because of social media. If someone gets more likes or new clothes, others feel jealous. It's like we are all trying to prove who is better, and it causes problems. One time, a friend posted pictures from a party I wasn't invited to, and it made me feel left out. I couldn't talk to her for days because I felt betrayed. It's hard to trust your friends when everything feels like a competition online. (P15)

This account demonstrates how social media metrics likes, comments, and visibility can generate emotional fractures in real-life relationships. A public school counsellor



highlighted how these peer conflicts go beyond momentary arguments, influencing students' academic engagement and emotional resilience:

I've seen cases where simple disagreements between friends become major conflicts because of social media. These conflicts affect their focus in class and, in some cases, lead to emotional distress like anxiety or depression. Adolescents are still forming their identities, and these conflicts destabilise their sense of belonging. When their social life feels unstable, everything else from academics to self-confidence, starts to unravel. It's not just about teenage drama; it's about emotional survival in a hyper-connected world. (P9)

This highlights how peer conflicts, when entangled with digital dynamics, can become a threat to adolescents' academic success and mental well-being. The compounding effect of low self-esteem and strained peer relationships creates a precarious emotional environment that, if unaddressed, could persist into adulthood.

Discussion

This study examined how toxic parenting and social influences affect adolescents' emotional health, identity development, and risk of suicidal ideation. The theme of strict parenting emerged prominently as a significant contributor to adolescents' suicidal ideation, emotional distress and identity challenges. Adolescents described experiences of verbal and emotional abuse, maltreatment by step-parents or guardians, constant parental comparison, and imposition of academic choices, all of which adversely impacted their psychological well-being. This finding resonates with prior research that links authoritarian parenting with detrimental mental health outcomes among adolescents (Menyene-AbasiAndem et al., 2025; Andem, et al., 2024). Specifically, harsh verbal and emotional abuse can undermine adolescents' self-esteem and foster emotional withdrawal, setting the stage for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Afolabi & Animashaun, 2024; Polat & Cansiz, 2024). These outcomes are well explained through Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which asserts that a secure attachment formed through consistent emotional warmth and responsiveness is important for healthy emotional regulation and self-concept development. In contrast, adolescents subjected to harsh, critical, or neglectful parenting develop insecure attachment styles, which increase their vulnerability to mental health challenges, as supported by Jan and Bajwa, (2025).

The study's findings reveal that maltreatment by stepparents or guardians intensifies adolescents' feelings of rejection and powerlessness, a point well-supported by family systems perspectives (Debowska, et al., 2021). Adolescents in hostile or unsupportive blended family environments often experience disruptions in their sense of belonging,



which is crucial for building resilience and forming a stable identity (Uzumcu, 2024; Kuzhiyengal & Kotian, 2024). This highlights an urgent need for parenting interventions that promote empathetic communication, emotional support, and positive family dynamics, especially within blended family structures. Another significant source of adolescent distress, particularly in private schools, was the parental imposition of academic choices. Adolescents reported feeling disempowered when their own aspirations were disregarded by parental expectations, a common cultural norm in many Nigerian families where parents exert strong control over education (Ojo, 2024; Oyinloye, 2021). This directly conflicts with Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968), which identifies adolescence as a critical stage of "identity versus role confusion" where young people strive for autonomy. When parents dictate academic paths, adolescents may experience role confusion, diminished motivation, and increased reliance on external validation, such as social media approval (Parent, 2023). These resulting identity struggles emphasise the need for family-centred approaches that encourage adolescent voice and participation in decisions impacting their future, ultimately fostering greater psychological well-being and autonomy.

Uninvolved parenting also emerged as a crucial factor influencing adolescent emotional and behavioural outcomes. Adolescents reported experiencing emotional and physical neglect despite material provision by parents, alongside parental resistance to external disciplinary efforts from schools or counsellors. This neglect fostered loneliness, emotional instability, and vulnerability to harmful peer influences or online communities. These findings resonate with existing research, which consistently links uninvolved or neglectful parenting to negative adolescent outcomes such as poor emotional adjustment, low self-esteem, and increased engagement in risky behaviours (Geraldo & Mabulay, 2024; Razzaq & Naseer, 2025; Wambua & Okul, 2024). Significantly, this pattern was observed across all socioeconomic levels, indicating that emotional neglect can occur even in materially supportive families. This observation strongly supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that adolescent development is shaped by various interacting systems, including the family and broader societal influences. Consequently, parental emotional availability is just as important as material support for fostering healthy adolescent development. The issue is further compounded by some parents' resistance to intervention from schools or counsellors, leaving adolescents without essential structure and guidance. This void can inadvertently push the adolescent toward potentially risky alternative support systems. These findings highlight an urgent need for initiatives that enhance parental engagement, emotional availability, and collaborative efforts between families and external support networks to safeguard adolescent well-being.



Identity crisis reflects adolescents' struggle to reconcile competing cultural expectations, social media influences, and peer conflicts, which collectively disrupt their sense of self. Adolescents reported how cultural pressures and rigid parental expectations often conflict with their personal aspirations, exacerbating confusion about their identity and future roles. Social media further complicates this process by amplifying unrealistic comparisons and idealised images of success, beauty, and lifestyle. Adolescents who are constantly exposed to carefully chosen social media information report feeling more emotionally distressed and having poorer self-esteem (Ajewumi et al., 2024; Orben et al., 2024; McComb et al., 2023). Adolescent can feel inadequate and insecure as a result of comparing their actual lives to the idealised ones they see online. For people who already struggle with parental strictness or neglect, this cycle of negative comparison is exacerbated. Additionally, social tension, loneliness, and a decline in academic engagement are all exacerbated by peer disputes that result from social media interactions (Sekoni & Olabimitan, 2025; Shim et al., 2025; Kanu et al., 2024). The performative nature of social media compels adolescents to maintain certain online personas, where failure to meet these expectations can trigger conflict and emotional fallout.

These results demonstrate how family relationships, cultural background, and digital settings all influence teenage mental health. Interventions that work must be similarly all-encompassing. Programs that help teenagers develop digital literacy and emotional resilience should be given top priority by mental health providers and educators. This will enable them to use social media critically, avoid unfavourable comparisons, and cultivate a positive self-concept. In order to create supportive settings that foster identity development, it is also essential to encourage open conversation regarding the emotional effect of social media among parents, adolescents, and educators (Banić & Orehovački, 2024; Purnama & Asdlori, 2023). Interventions should target family relationships and social environments to build psychological resilience, promoting authoritative parenting, emotional involvement, adolescent voice, and addressing social media challenges in Nigerian contexts.

Implications of the findings

This study presents crucial implications for mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and families in Nigeria by drawing attention to the intricate links between toxic parenting, social media use, and suicidal ideation among adolescents. In a sociocultural context where conversations around mental health and suicide often remain taboo, these findings offer a valuable framework for early intervention and systemic change. For mental health practitioners, the results underscore the need for culturally adapted



therapeutic interventions that prioritise the emotional well-being of adolescents navigating toxic home environments. Many Nigerian adolescents suffer in silence due to emotionally neglectful or strict parenting styles, which are often normalised within certain family settings. This emotional suppression increases vulnerability to suicidal ideation. Mental health professionals can use these findings to integrate trauma-informed care and emotional regulation techniques into their work with adolescents. Importantly, therapy should address the compounding role of digital exposure, especially when adolescents use social media as an emotional escape from hostile family dynamics.

The study also emphasises that social media, while often serving as a coping mechanism, can intensify emotional distress through online comparison, cyberbullying, and validation-seeking behaviours. These experiences have been shown to erode self-esteem and deepen feelings of loneliness, especially among adolescents already dealing with poor parental relationships. As such, there is a critical need for digital mental health literacy programs in schools and communities. These initiatives should not only educate adolescents about safe online practices but also train caregivers to recognise how unregulated social media use may silently contribute to emotional instability and suicidal tendencies.

Additionally, policies must include parental education frameworks that promote positive parenting, emotional responsiveness, and open communication. Empowering parents with knowledge about the psychological impact of harsh discipline, emotional neglect, and invalidation can reduce the risk of adolescent mental breakdowns and suicidal ideation. Community-based parenting programs—especially in low-income or high-stress settings can further serve as preventive platforms to support family mental health. Finally, this research contributes meaningfully to Nigeria’s growing discourse on youth suicide prevention. By revealing how parenting styles and social media exposure converge to influence emotional well-being, it advocates for a multisectoral response involving families, schools, health services, and digital platforms. Suicide prevention efforts must no longer focus solely on crisis intervention but should also address the upstream causes, namely, toxic parenting practices and emotionally unsafe environments.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study was conducted within the specific geographic and cultural context of Nigerian adolescents, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other regions or populations. Variations in cultural norms, parenting styles, social media exposure, and mental health awareness across different Nigerian communities could influence adolescents’ psychological experiences and suicidal ideation differently. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias, where participants



may not fully remember or accurately disclose their experiences of toxic parenting, social media use, or suicidal thoughts. Social desirability bias may also have influenced participants' responses, as adolescents might have provided answers they believed to be socially acceptable or less stigmatising.

The cross-sectional nature of this study captures adolescent perspectives at a single point in time and therefore lacks longitudinal data that could provide insights into how toxic parenting and social media use affect suicidal ideation over an extended period. Future studies employing longitudinal designs could better track changes and causality over time. Furthermore, this study focused primarily on the negative psychological impacts of toxic parenting and social media use but did not extensively explore potential protective factors or coping mechanisms that adolescents may employ. Subsequent research could adopt a more holistic approach by investigating these positive influences and resilience factors.

Moreover, the qualitative nature of the study means the findings are subject to the interpretations of the researchers, and the study did not explicitly detail measures taken to minimise researcher bias or ensure objectivity. Future research should incorporate rigorous methodological steps, such as triangulation and member checking, to enhance credibility. Lastly, while this study sheds light on the psychological effects of toxic parenting and social media use, it did not fully address other contextual variables, such as social media validation, social comparison, peer relationships, school environments, and community support systems, which might also influence suicidal ideation. Future investigations should consider these broader psychosocial factors to deepen the understanding of adolescent mental health in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study reveals the significant psychological impact that toxic parenting and social media use have on the mental well-being of Nigerian adolescents, particularly concerning suicidal ideation. The findings underscore how negative family dynamics, characterised by harmful parenting behaviours, combined with the pervasive influence of social media, can exacerbate feelings of distress, isolation, and hopelessness among young people. These factors create a complex interplay that contributes to increased vulnerability to suicidal thoughts, emphasising the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions. Importantly, the study brings attention to the cultural and social context of Nigeria, where mental health issues among adolescents remain under-addressed, and stigma around psychological distress often hinders help-seeking behaviour. By deepening the understanding of these influences, the research offers valuable insights for parents, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to develop culturally sensitive



strategies that promote healthier family environments, responsible social media use, and accessible mental health support. In conclusion, addressing the psychological challenges faced by Nigerian adolescents requires a multifaceted approach that considers both family dynamics and the digital environment. Efforts to reduce toxic parenting practices and foster safe, positive social media engagement are essential steps toward improving adolescent mental health outcomes and preventing suicidal ideation in this population.

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Data availability statement

Data regarding this paper will be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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