Digital Governance in Nigeria Universities: Student Agency, Policy Rhetoric, and Implementation Realities

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Abstract

Universities in Nigeria increasingly confront digital governance dilemmas amid competing demands for student protection and autonomy. The typologies of universities - including government, private and faith-based types – present an interesting critical conversation to enlighten our understanding and interpretation of issues surrounding these governance dilemmas, hence a comparative study of the two types of universities in Nigeria was undertaken. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examined institutional social media policies across Nigerian universities through management interviews (*n* = 10) and student surveys (*n* = 229). Anchored on Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, findings reveal substantial policy-practice gaps – indicating a coexistence absolute smartphone prohibition, 73.3% of

students with active social media (WhatsApp) usage. Qualitative analysis identified implementation challenges including inadequate enforcement, student circumvention strategies, definitional ambiguities, jurisdictional limitations, and control-autonomy tensions. Further, it found that prohibitionist policies are not as control-effective but instead it eliminating technologically-enhanced educational benefits. The study demonstrates how students exercise agency through active media selection (UGT) and develop self-regulatory capacities through observational learning (SCT), processes undermined by prohibition-based governance. Evidence-based alternatives emphasising digital literacy education, context-specific restrictions, and pedagogical integration are considered more developmentally appropriate. Contributions include empirical documentation of implementation failures, theoretical integration advancing policy scholarship, and practical frameworks for evidence-based governance in digitally saturated higher education environments. Policy implications should address curriculum development, institutional capacity building, and national regulatory frameworks aligned with developmental objectives within Nigerian contextual realities.

Keywords: Digital Citizenship; Higher education policy; Social cognitive theory; Student development; Uses and Gratifications Theory

Introduction

University administrators worldwide face complex dilemmas regarding student digital behaviour. Should institutions regulate social media use? Which enforcement mechanisms are effective? Where lie the boundaries between legitimate institutional authority and inappropriate intrusion? These questions are particularly pressing in African contexts, where cultural norms emphasise institutional oversight while globalisation demands autonomy-supporting educational environments (Nsamenang, 2006).

The challenge of digital governance reflects broader tensions in contemporary higher education. Universities simultaneously treat students as autonomous adults and as individuals requiring guidance. Institutions are responsible for holistic development yet must respect individual freedoms. Academic missions promoting critical thinking often coexist uneasily with attempts to restrict access to information technologies. Such contradictions are particularly acute regarding social media—ubiquitous platforms offering educational opportunities while posing genuine risks of distraction and exposure to inappropriate content.

Nigerian universities provide a compelling context for investigating these tensions. Rapid technological diffusion has created unprecedented student connectivity. Diverse institutional types—including federal, state, private, faith-based, and secular universities—adopt varied governance approaches. Cultural expectations around institutional authority differ from Western contexts, where individualism predominates. Parental expectations often reinforce institutional monitoring of student behaviour. Together, these factors create complex governance landscapes that warrant systematic investigation.

This study examines how Nigerian universities navigate digital governance. It employs a comparative investigation of institutional policies, implementation mechanisms, and effectiveness. Drawing on interviews with ten senior management staff and survey data from 229 undergraduates, the study documents policy heterogeneity, exposes gaps between formal policies and actual student practices, and analyses factors shaping implementation challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian institutions of higher learning contend with issue of social media distraction among students. While digital media are meant to enhance overall human activities including learning, extant literature seems to advance a high prevalence of challenges associated with social media to students in higher institutions of learning. Despite the prevailing notion that social media militates against learning efforts by students, studies have not sufficiently differentiated the extent to which undergraduates from faith-based institutions versus non-faith-based ones are affected (Adeniran, 2016). Understanding these distinctions and exploring the underlying reasons provide insights that could either reinforce confidence in various denominational educational choices or prompt a reassessment of existing beliefs. This comparative study has established a clear contrast between these student groups, shedding new light on this phenomenon using Southwest Nigeria as the study's focal point.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. Determine the extent to which faith-based undergraduate students own and expose themselves to the social media as against their non-faith-based counterparts in the course of their studies;
2. Highlight which social media channels faith-based undergraduates are likely to expose themselves to compared to their counterparts in non-faith-based universities;
3. Determine the social media content that faith-based undergraduates are likely to be exposed to as compared to their counterparts in non-faith-based universities;
4. Examine how faith-based undergraduates react/respond to social media content that they interact with compared to their counterparts in non-faith-based universities;
5. Determine if faith-based undergraduates' social media exposures affect their reading habit and performance as against their counterparts in non-faith-based universities

Literature Review

African Higher Education Contexts

Conceptually, African universities operate within distinctive contexts shaping governance. Rapid expansion increases access but strains resources (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Institutional diversity reflects colonial

legacies, religious influence, and developmental priorities. Cultural norms emphasising communal obligations and respect for authority differ from Western individualism (Nsamenang, 2006).

Limited research examines digital governance in Nigerian contexts. Existing studies focus on infrastructure and technology adoption with little or none on behavioural regulation (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2013). Western frameworks often assume individual autonomy, which may misalign with communal values in African settings (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Whether self-regulation represents an appropriate developmental outcome in these contexts requires empirical assessment rather than assumption.

Digital Governance in Higher Education

Universities increasingly regulate student technology use amid concerns about academic distraction, time displacement, and access to inappropriate content. Governance approaches range from strict prohibition to moderate restriction or unrestricted access (Selwyn, 2016). These variations reflect institutional philosophies, student demographics, and practical enforcement considerations.

Research on policy effectiveness shows mixed results. Some studies document negative associations between social media use and academic performance (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), supporting restrictive policies. Others highlight educational benefits, including collaborative learning, resource sharing, and academic community building (Junco et al., 2011), challenging prohibitionist rationales. Methodological limitations—such as correlational designs, self-reported data, and insufficient controls—complicate interpretation.

Implementation research remains limited. Most studies examine formal policies rather than enforcement, student compliance, or mediating factors affecting outcomes. This gap is significant given documented discrepancies between policy intentions and results across educational domains (Hill & Hupe, 2014). Understanding governance effectiveness requires attention to implementation processes, not just policy statements.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) to understand student digital behaviour in relation to institutional governance. The framework recognises both student agency and the developmental processes enabling informed self-regulation.

Uses and Gratifications Theory positions audiences as active agents selecting media to meet specific needs (Katz et al., 1973). In this case, students deliberately and actively choose social media for their

preferred motives, such as information seeking social interaction, identity expression, and entertainment. This perspective challenges the old paradigm and assumptions that receivers of information – in this case – students - passively receive harmful content. Effective governance must acknowledge student agency rather than treating students as incompetent minors.

Social Cognitive Theory emphasises reciprocal determinism among personal factors, behavioural patterns, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). Behaviour develops through observational learning, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and self-regulation. Prohibitionist policies that block autonomous practice hinder development of essential competencies for navigating digital environments independently.

Theoretical Integration synthesises UGT and SCT, showing that students actively select media to satisfy perceived needs while developing self-regulatory capacities through social learning. Governance should support informed media selection and gradual responsibility transfer rather than impose blanket control. This integration addresses limitations in each framework: UGT explains motivation but not competency development, while SCT emphasises learning but underplays individual gratifications. Together, the frameworks offer a lens for analysing governance effectiveness within the context of students' digital access. With regard to institutional policy, this model suggests that prohibitions fail to account for student agency in media selection. opportunities for developing self-regulation and legitimate educational and social gratifications motivating usage.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate digital governance in Nigerian universities and its relationship to students' digital experience. The methodology combined qualitative and quantitative data to capture both institutional perspectives and student practices. Integrating these data streams enabled a comprehensive assessment of policy landscapes, implementation effectiveness, and governance challenges.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), prioritising qualitative and quantitative data. Survey of students and in-depth interviews of management staff were chosen as research methods which allowed for detailed exploration of institutional policy rationales and strategies, alongside quantitative assessment of policy implementation through student-reported behaviours.

Semi-structured interviews with institutional management provided rich insights into policy rationales, implementation strategies, perceived effectiveness, and challenges. Management perspectives required triangulation with student reports to mitigate potential social desirability bias. Consequently, a survey of undergraduate students assessed policy implementation by comparing stated policies with reported behaviours. Surveys also captured usage patterns, perceived impacts, and demographic variations.

Integration Strategy: Data were analysed independently and then integrated. Integration identified convergences (agreement between datasets), divergences (conflicting findings), and expansions (one dataset elaborating on another).

Method of data collection

About 10 senior management staff were purposively selected to reflect diverse governance approaches from Anchor University (private, faith-based, Pentecostal): Deputy Registrar (Male), Trinity University (private, faith-based, non-denominational): Registrar (Male), University of Lagos (public, federal, secular): Senior Executive Officer (Male). Additional participants represented institutions across southern Nigeria, providing geographical diversity. All held roles involving policy formulation and student affairs oversight.

Students: Surveys reached 229 undergraduates from 88 universities (120 faith-based, 32 non-faith-based, 77 uncertain/unreported). The sample was diverse:

- Age: 16–40+ years
- Gender: 119 female (52%), 110 male (48%)
- Academic levels: First to final year
- Institutional types: Federal, state, private faith-based, private secular

Semi-structured protocols explored policy existence, rationales, enforcement strategies, perceived compliance, and governance improvement recommendations. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked for accuracy. Structured questionnaires were administered via campus assistants, online platforms, and lecturers. Surveys addressed demographics, institutional policies, platform usage, gratifications, perceived academic impacts, and self-regulation strategies. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and followed ethical approval.

Results

The results reveal a complex governance landscape shaped by diverse institutional philosophies, uneven implementation mechanisms, and persistent student agency. The evidence demonstrates that Nigerian

universities adopt markedly different approaches to digital governance, yet these approaches have limited influence on actual student behaviours. This section presents the policy landscape, quantifies implementation gaps, and examines the structural challenges that undermine policy effectiveness.

Part 1: Policy Landscape—Institutional Heterogeneity

Management interviews confirmed substantial policy variation across institutions. These differences resist simple categorisation by institutional type. Three broad governance models emerged: comprehensive prohibition, informal moderation, and unrestricted access.

Approach 1: Comprehensive Prohibition

Institutional Example: Anchor University

The Deputy Registrar described a clear, documented prohibition of internet-enabled phones:

"We have a clear prohibition of Android, iOS, and Windows smartphones. Students may keep basic phones for essential communication, but smartphones are not permitted."

Rationale: The justification rested on religious principles and concerns about moral formation. Smartphones were seen as gateways to inappropriate content and distractions incompatible with Christian discipline.

Enforcement Mechanisms: The institution relied on random checks by security personnel, disciplinary committee oversight, and peer accountability.

Sanctions: Sanctions ranged from warnings and temporary confiscation to suspension or loss of privileges. The institution emphasised a redemptive rather than punitive philosophy.

Claimed Compliance: Management reported "zero tolerance" and asserted high compliance, with only occasional violations.

Approach 2: Informal Moderation

Institutional Example: Trinity University

The Registrar described a policy based on unwritten norms rather than codified rules. The institution moderated usage during lectures and examinations but did not ban device ownership.

Rationale: The aim was balance and realism. Administrators acknowledged the impracticality of total prohibition and emphasised responsible usage.

Enforcement: Lecturers and invigilators applied situational enforcement when disruptions occurred. No broad surveillance mechanisms existed.

Perceived Effectiveness: Compliance was estimated at around 85%. Most students cooperated; only a minority persistently violated expectations.

Nuanced Perspective: The institution recognised both academic benefits and potential risks, emphasising that outcomes depended on individual behaviour rather than the technology itself.

Approach 3: Unrestricted Access

Institutional Example: University of Lagos

Management reported no restrictions on device ownership or social media usage beyond examinations.

Rationale: The institutional philosophy centred on student autonomy. Administrators argued that excessive control undermines adult development and contradicts the university's secular mandate.

Institutional Mission Alignment: The approach reflected the university's identity as a diverse, inclusive, public institution focused on academic excellence rather than moral regulation.

Acknowledged Complexity: Management recognised that social media could both hinder and support academic performance, depending on usage patterns.

Within-Category Variation

Notably, Anchor and Trinity—both Christian faith-based universities—adopted contrasting approaches. This variation challenges assumptions that religious identity alone predicts governance models.

Several interacting factors help explain the divergence:

- Denominational traditions
- Founding missions and institutional histories
- Leadership philosophies concerning autonomy and discipline
- Student demographics and parental expectations

These factors show that governance choices arise from complex institutional logics rather than fixed religious identities.

Part 2: Policy–Practice Gaps—Quantitative Evidence

Survey data exposed substantial implementation gaps. Despite management claims of strict control, student usage patterns remained remarkably consistent across institutional types.

Table 1: Social Media Platform Usage Frequencies

Platform	Daily Use	Several Times Weekly	Weekly	Monthly	Never	Total Respondents
WhatsApp	73.3%	14.8%	4.8%	2.2%	4.8%	229
Facebook	31.9%	19.2%	12.7%	9.2%	27.1%	229
Instagram	28.4%	18.3%	13.5%	11.4%	28.4%	229
Twitter/X	22.7%	15.7%	11.8%	10.0%	39.7%	229
YouTube	45.4%	26.2%	15.3%	7.0%	6.1%	229

WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform, with 73.3% daily use across the full sample.

Contradictory Evidence

Anchor University reported "vast majority compliance," yet 73.3% of faith-based students used WhatsApp daily—a platform requiring smartphones that Anchor prohibits.

Table 2: WhatsApp Usage by Institutional Type

Institutional Type	Daily Use	Several Times Weekly	Weekly	Monthly	Never	Total
Faith-Based	73.3%	15.0%	5.0%	1.7%	5.0%	120
Non-Faith-Based	78.1%	12.5%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	32
Uncertain	71.4%	15.6%	5.2%	2.6%	5.2%	77

Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences in WhatsApp usage across institutional types (p = .985). This suggests that restrictive policies exert minimal influence on actual behaviour.

Interpreting Implementation Gaps

Several explanations help account for the divergence between policy and practice:

1. Sampling heterogeneity across faith-based institutions
2. Weak enforcement capacity, even in prohibitionist settings
3. Off-campus usage, beyond institutional jurisdiction

4. Definitional ambiguities about what constitutes prohibited behaviour
5. Policy–rhetoric gaps, where formal rules function symbolically rather than practically

Regardless of explanation, the data demonstrate a profound mismatch between policy intentions and everyday student behaviour.

Part 3: Implementation Challenges—Qualitative Themes

Thematic analysis revealed five structural challenges that cut across all policy approaches.

Theme 1: Inadequate Enforcement Resources: Institutions lacked the personnel and infrastructure required for sustained monitoring. Enforcement remained selective, focusing on examinations rather than everyday use.

Theme 2: Student Circumvention Strategies: Students employed a range of creative strategies, including hiding devices, borrowing phones, and shifting usage off-campus. Institutional monitoring could not keep pace with these tactics.

Theme 3: Off-Campus Jurisdictional Limits: Universities operate mainly within campus boundaries. Students therefore used social media freely in hostels, off-campus residences, and during holidays.

Theme 4: Definitional Ambiguities: Administrators struggled to define “misuse” clearly. Digital activities range from academic collaboration to entertainment, making consistent enforcement difficult.

Theme 5: Control–Autonomy Tensions: Administrators expressed unease about both excessive control and excessive permissiveness. Balancing protection with autonomy proved a central governance dilemma.

Integrated Findings Summary

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data yields four key conclusions:

1. Policy heterogeneity is substantial, with no uniform governance model.
2. Implementation gaps persist across all contexts, including those claiming strict prohibition.
3. Structural challenges severely limit institutional control.

4. Theoretical misalignment weakens prohibitionist policies, which conflict with UGT and SCT principles of agency and self-regulation.

Discussion

This section examines why prohibitionist policies consistently fail, despite their widespread adoption in some Nigerian universities. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, it argues that prohibition is both impractical and developmentally counterproductive. The discussion then outlines alternative, evidence-based governance approaches that align more closely with student behaviour, institutional capacity, and African contextual realities.

Why Prohibition Fails: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence

This section explains why prohibition-based governance models consistently fail in university settings. The evidence shows that such approaches are neither practical nor developmentally appropriate. They overestimate institutional control, underestimate student agency, and conflict with established theoretical frameworks.

Practical Unenforceability

Prohibition cannot be enforced effectively. Institutions lack the resources required for constant monitoring. Students adopt sophisticated circumvention strategies, including device concealment and off-campus access beyond institutional oversight. Encrypted platforms further prevent monitoring. Policies that claim total control, yet cannot enforce it, weaken institutional credibility and authority.

From a UGT perspective, students choose media that meet social, informational, and entertainment needs. Removing platforms offering valued gratifications leads to rational resistance. Students therefore maintain access through any means available.

From an SCT perspective, prohibition undermines opportunities for autonomous practice, which is essential for developing self-regulation. By removing chances for independent decision-making, institutions impede students' ability to navigate digital environments throughout life.

Developmental Inappropriateness

Prohibition treats university students as children needing protection rather than emerging adults developing autonomy. Such approaches block necessary developmental progression.

According to SCT, students build self-regulation through observation, feedback, and reflective practice. Prohibition removes these learning contexts.

Developmental theory also suggests a progression from external control to integrated self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Prohibition freezes students at the first stage, preventing the development of mature, internally guided judgement.

Elimination of Educational Benefits

Prohibition removes academic advantages alongside recreational risks. Survey data show that students use social media to share materials, coordinate group work, and access information. These educational gains are substantial.

UGT research confirms that students turn to social media to satisfy information and learning gratifications. Prohibition ignores these legitimate uses and assumes all use is harmful. Predictably, students resist restrictions that remove tools they find academically valuable.

Student Resentment and Relationship Damage

Policies perceived as excessive or paternalistic foster resentment. Students experience such measures as distrust and infantilisation. This perception diminishes intrinsic motivation, heightens reactance, and weakens institutional relationships.

Autonomy-supportive governance, by contrast, builds cooperation. When students feel respected, they are more likely to align voluntarily with institutional expectations.

Resource Misallocation

Monitoring prohibitions consumes resources that could strengthen teaching, support services, or campus infrastructure. Security checks, disciplinary hearings, and investigations demand significant staff time but achieve negligible behavioural change.

Opportunity costs are substantial. Investment in digital literacy or pedagogical technology would produce greater educational impact.

Policy–Rhetoric Gaps

Some institutions maintain prohibitionist policies for symbolic reasons—signalling moral discipline to parents or denominational bodies—while tolerating widespread non-compliance. Such decoupling erodes legitimacy and creates confusion about expectations.

Institutional theory notes that organisations sometimes adopt formal policies for legitimacy rather than practice. Prohibition often functions in this way.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that there is a wide variation in policy across Nigerian universities between official regulations and everyday student behaviour, and several structural barriers that weaken enforcement. It further concludes that the integration of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory helps explain why restrictive policies fail consistently as students act as purposeful media users who seek platforms that meet genuine academic and social needs. Self-regulation, however, develops through guided autonomy and social learning, not through blanket restrictions. Implementation theory further clarifies how limited resources, weak jurisdiction, and predictable student resistance create systemic enforcement failures, even where administrative intent is strong. Ultimately, effective digital governance requires honest recognition of institutional limits, commitment to evidence-based policy, and a developmental ethos that supports student autonomy while addressing legitimate concerns. Such reforms will strengthen institutional integrity, respect student rights, and prepare graduates for confident, ethical, and effective participation in digital environments. For Nigerian universities seeking excellence while honouring local contexts, this transformation is both necessary and timely.

The paper recommends more constructive governance models via digital literacy education which equips students to make informed decisions and develop lifelong self-regulatory competencies. Context-sensitive restrictions address specific risks without denying access to useful tools. Pedagogical integration enables institutions to harness digital platforms for teaching and learning. Evidence-based policy development shifts institutions away from assumptions and towards measurable impact. These strategies respect student agency, align with developmental goals, and acknowledge the practical limits of institutional control.

The governance challenge is both universal and context-dependent. Communal values, respect for hierarchy, and parental expectations shape views of institutional authority. Resource constraints impose sharper limits on enforcement than in wealthier systems. Diverse student age profiles also undermine policies that treat undergraduates as children. Effective governance must therefore blend universal developmental principles with local cultural realities, balancing autonomy with communal responsibility.

Future research should investigate long-term outcomes of different governance approaches, explore cultural influences on policy acceptance, analyse student perceptions of legitimacy, and evaluate digital citizenship interventions. Such work will deepen theoretical understanding and support practical improvements across African higher education.

Recommendations for Multiple Stakeholders

For University Administrators

Immediate Actions:

- Conduct policy audits.
- Establish consultation mechanisms.
- Pilot digital literacy programmes.
- Review enforcement costs and alternatives.

Medium-Term Actions:

- Develop digital citizenship curricula.
- Expand pedagogical technology integration.
- Implement monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Invest in faculty development.

Long-Term Actions:

- Shift governance philosophy towards developmental models.
- Build academic and digital responsibility cultures.
- Engage in inter-institutional collaboration.
- Contribute to national policy reforms.

For National Policymakers and Regulators

NUC Actions:

- Develop guidance that is evidence-based and autonomy-respecting.
- Protect student rights.
- Promote knowledge sharing across institutions.
- Require evaluation and reporting.

NOUN Grant Support:

- Fund rigorous research.
- Support longitudinal and comparative studies.
- Facilitate research–practice partnerships.

Curriculum Mandates:

- Embed digital literacy at all levels.
- Train faculty.
- Set assessment standards.
- Develop shared resources for low-resource contexts.

For Researchers

The study identifies priority areas including:

- Longitudinal, comparative, and implementation research
- Student perception studies
- African-centred theoretical development
- Intervention evaluation

Methodologically, the study encourages mixed methods, longitudinal designs, and theoretical integration.

For Students and Student Organisations

Advocacy:

- Engage actively in policy development.
- Demand transparency.
- Promote peer-led digital responsibility initiatives.

Self-Regulation:

- Develop time management skills.
- Build metacognitive awareness.
- Seek support for problematic usage.
- Model responsible behaviour.

Sustainability and Scalability Considerations

Effective implementation requires:

Resource Planning: Initial investment in digital literacy programmes produces long-term gains and reduces enforcement costs.

Cultural Adaptation: Governance models must be flexible and sensitive to institutional cultures, missions, and community values.

Capacity Building: Institutions must strengthen their ability to conduct evidence-based policy design and evaluation.

Inter-Institutional Collaboration: Collaborative networks enable shared learning, reduce duplication, and enhance sector-wide impact.

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