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**THERAPOETICS IN DIGITAL SPACES: SOCIAL MEDIA STORYTELLING AND MENTAL
HEALTH CONVERSATIONS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN RIVERS STATE
UNIVERSITIES**

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ABSTRACT

This study was an examination of therapoetics in digital space, specifically social media storytelling and mental health discussions among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities. Specifically, the study examined the relationships between personal storytelling and mental health awareness, sharing of lived experiences and emotional support, and narrative expression and help-seeking communication. A correlational research design was used. The study was carried out in Rivers State University (RSU), and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rivers State (IAUE) Nigeria. There were 346 undergraduate students, 217 students from the Department of Mass Communication, IAUE and 129 students from the Department of Mass Communication, RSU. Sampling was employed in the census. A total of 346 questionnaires were given out and 321 were retrieved, corresponding to a retrieval rate of 92.8%. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data, which were the Social Media Storytelling Questionnaire (SMSQ) and Mental Health Conversations Questionnaire (MHCQ) developed on a four-point Likert scale. The instruments were face and content validated by experts and reliability was achieved by Cronbach's alpha. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to analyse the data obtained and the null hypotheses were tested at $\alpha = 0.05$ significance level. The results indicated high positive correlations between personal storytelling and mental health awareness ($r = 0.684$, $p < .001$), sharing of lived experiences and emotional support ($r = 0.721$, $p < .001$), and personal expression through narratives and communication of help-seeking ($r = 0.756$, $p < .001$). The findings indicated that social media storytelling is a significant communicative aspect of mental health discourses among the undergraduate students, and an opportunity for awareness, emotional support and help-seeking communication. But social media stories are not a replacement for health care.

Keywords: Therapoetics, Social Media Storytelling, Mental Health Awareness, Emotional Support, Help-Seeking Communication.

Introduction

Digital technologies are evolving at a fast rate and this has changed the nature of communication in the modern world by providing new means by which people communicate, share experiences, express feelings, and join in social interactions. This shift is most pronounced in the extensive use of social media platforms, where users can post, share and comment on text, images, video, stories, and more, using written content or video. These platforms are significant spaces for social communication, information sharing, personal experience and identity expression among university students. Also, social media has become a significant space for young people to communicate about issues that impact on both their personal and social well-being, in Nigeria, where it is part of the daily lives of the undergraduate students. The increasing importance of digital communication for undergraduate students in Nigerian federal universities has been highlighted by Adimora et al. (2016) who established the prevalence of social media networking among undergraduate students in these universities.

The interactive aspect of social networks has also given people new opportunities to share their experiences that might otherwise be hard to communicate in traditional situations where someone is physically with them. Students can share personal experiences, provide descriptions of challenges, share feelings, share opinions and get feedback from their online communities. This has turned social media into a medium for the dissemination of information but also a medium where people are active producers and diffusers of information. In the context of the experiences of Nigerian undergraduates, Aileru and Olatokun (2021) showed that social media plays an important role in cyber-victimisation experience. The implications are that social media is now firmly interwoven into the social life of university students, and thus offers a key context in which to analyse how they are communicating their lived reality.

Social media storytelling is one specific facet of this digital communication landscape that is especially crucial. Story telling is the process of building and sharing experiences with stories that enable people to share a narrative about what has happened, how things are being understood, what they are feeling and what they are trying to tell others. Storytelling can be adopted via written messages, reflections, short movies, photos with stories, testimonials, digital stories and other forms of user-generated content on social media. For undergraduate students, this can include experiences surrounding school life stressors like money stress, family issues, loneliness, disappointment, stress and others. When sharing such experiences, students can share what they have experienced, and they also have opportunities to give others feedback, relate, empathise and offer support.

Therapoetics is the use of storytelling and the expression of narrative as communicative means by which people share their personal experience, communicate their feelings, reflect on challenging events, create understanding and facilitate interactions that are supportive. The idea is not that social media stories are professional psychotherapy or clinical treatment. Instead, it makes prominent the role of narrative communication in its potentially supportive and meaning-making role. Through the story telling of experiences of emotional difficulty and with positive feedback from others, the interactions can help to raise awareness, build connections, provide emotional support, and trigger conversations with other people about where to help might be available. In this regard, the relevance of the practice of “therapoetics” is seen more clearly in the context of the mental-health experiences of the students of the undergraduate level. The university years are also connected to academic expectations, financial worries, relationship issues, and uncertainty about the future, among other experiences that could impact students' emotional and psychological health. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that psychological distress and problematic digital behaviour are important issues among university students. In a study conducted by Asibong et al. (2020), the relationship between undergraduates' psychological discomfort and social media usage was

investigated. However, Afe et al. (2020) examined undergraduates in Southwest Nigeria and their association with social media use, smartphone addiction and psychological morbidity. All of these studies suggest that students' digital experiences should be part of the bigger picture of their emotional and psychological experiences.

The need for effective mental-health communication is further strengthened by evidence of limited mental-health knowledge among Nigerian university students. Aluh et al. (2019) opined that inadequate mental-health literacy among undergraduate students may hinder their ability to recognise emotional difficulties, understand and interpret mental-health experiences, respond appropriately to the experiences of others, and identify suitable sources of assistance. Consequently, communication environments that provide access to reliable mental-health information and personal experiences may play an important role in enhancing students' understanding of mental-health issues and encouraging informed and supportive conversations.

Social media has increasingly become one of these communication environments because students can encounter health-related information while interacting with friends, organisations, influencers, professionals and other online communities. Anaeto et al. (2021) found that Nigerian undergraduates use social media as a source of health information. Oni et al. (2025) similarly examined social media usage for health information among undergraduate students. This combination of accessibility and the possibility of misleading information demonstrates that social media can create opportunities for health communication while simultaneously presenting challenges that require critical evaluation.

The current study is especially pertinent to the link between social media and knowledge of mental health issues. Mental-health awareness involves understanding mental-health issues, recognising possible psychological difficulties, challenging misconceptions and becoming aware of available sources of support. Social media storytelling may be associated with such awareness because personal narratives can expose students to experiences and perspectives that differ from their own. Ojewumi et al. (2025) specifically examined social media use, motivation and mental-health awareness among Nigerian undergraduates, providing evidence of the relevance of social media to students' understanding of mental-health issues.

The potential of social media to contribute to mental-health awareness is also evident in digital mental-health advocacy. Owolabi et al. (2024) examined the role of media influencers in sensitising Nigerian students about mental health and highlighted the potential of social media personalities to provide information and influence perceptions concerning mental-health issues. Such digital communication can make mental-health issues more visible and may create opportunities for students to encounter information and narratives relating to psychological well-being.

Beyond awareness, the sharing of lived experiences through social media may be associated with emotional support. When students communicate experiences that others can relate to, their narratives may create opportunities for empathy, encouragement, reassurance and interpersonal connection. Naslund et al. (2020) observed that social media can create opportunities for social connection and mental-health support, while also emphasising risks associated with digital environments.

The possibility of emotional support does not mean that social media interactions are always beneficial. The same digital environment that facilitates connection can also expose students to cyberbullying, criticism, rejection, misinformation, social comparison and excessive use. Abamara et al. (2024) reported a relationship between social-media addiction and mental-health outcomes among undergraduates, while Awopetu et al. (2024) concluded from a systematic review that social media has both beneficial and harmful implications for Nigerian university students. These findings

reinforce the need to move beyond a simplistic understanding of social media as either beneficial or harmful and instead examine particular forms of communication and interaction.

One such communicative dimension is help-seeking communication. Help-seeking involves communicating a need for assistance and identifying appropriate individuals, groups or professional services that can provide support. For students experiencing emotional difficulties, the willingness and ability to communicate their concerns may influence whether they obtain appropriate assistance. Aluh et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of mental-health literacy among Nigerian undergraduates, while Pederson et al. (2020) found that mental-health stigma among university health-care students in Nigeria can constitute a barrier to the utilisation of mental-health services.

Digital spaces may provide an alternative environment for initiating such communication. Students may use social media to ask questions, share concerns, seek advice, discuss personal experiences or direct others toward available sources of assistance. Ogundipe et al. (2025) examined perceptions, attitudes and use of digital health platforms for mental-health promotion among university students and demonstrated the relevance of digital platforms to mental-health communication. The availability of digital platforms does not automatically mean that students will seek professional help, but such platforms may provide an initial space in which concerns are communicated and information about possible assistance is obtained.

Recent Nigerian research continues to demonstrate the importance of examining digital health communication among undergraduates. Onyechi and Akinwusi (2026) examined social media and health-information-seeking behaviour among undergraduates in Ibadan, while Ahmadu et al. (2026) examined online health-information seeking among undergraduates at Imo State University. Ene et al. (2026) reviewed evidence on the impact of social media on the mental health of Nigerian undergraduate students and identified both potential benefits, such as social connectedness and mental-health literacy, and potential risks, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness and problematic use. Dangana et al. (2026) similarly examined mental-health effects of social-media use among undergraduates in Ogun State.

Although existing Nigerian studies have provided valuable evidence on social-media addiction, psychological distress, mental-health awareness, health-information seeking, stigma, digital health promotion and the general relationship between social media and mental health, comparatively less attention has been given to social media storytelling as a specific communicative practice. Much of the existing research has focused on how much students use social media, whether social-media use is associated with psychological outcomes, or whether students obtain health information through digital platforms. Less is known about how the act of narrating personal experiences, sharing lived experiences and expressing emotions through social media relates to specific dimensions of mental-health conversations. This gap is important because storytelling represents more than simple social-media use: it involves constructing a narrative, communicating meaning and inviting an audience to interpret and respond. Therefore, examining social-media storytelling provides an opportunity to understand the communicative processes through which digital spaces may be associated with mental-health conversations. It is against this background that the present study examined therapoetics in digital spaces, focusing on the relationships between personal storytelling and mental-health awareness, sharing of lived experiences and emotional support, and narrative expression and help-seeking communication.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing advancement of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media have transformed the manner in which individuals communicate, share experiences and express their thoughts and emotions. Among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities, social media platforms have emerged as important digital spaces where personal stories, lived experiences

and emotional expressions are shared through posts, videos, written narratives and other interactive forms of communication. Beyond entertainment and social interaction, these platforms provide opportunities for individuals to communicate experiences that may otherwise be difficult to discuss in conventional face-to-face environments. Within this digital context, therapoetics refers in this study to the use of storytelling and narrative expression as communicative processes through which individuals articulate experiences, express emotions, foster understanding and encourage supportive conversations. Mental health remains an important component of students' overall well-being, particularly during the undergraduate years when students encounter academic demands, financial pressures, relationship difficulties, social expectations and other challenges. Yet conversations surrounding mental health may be constrained by stigma, fear of judgement, discrimination, misconceptions, limited awareness and reluctance to communicate emotional struggles or seek assistance.

Although students increasingly use social media for communication and self-expression, the empirical evidence available in the Nigerian context has concentrated largely on social-media use, addiction, psychological distress, health-information seeking and general mental-health outcomes. Comparatively less empirical attention has been directed specifically toward social-media storytelling as a communicative practice and its relationship with dimensions of mental-health conversations. In Rivers State universities, it is not sufficiently established how personal storytelling relates to mental-health awareness, how sharing of lived experiences relates to emotional support, and how narrative expression relates to help-seeking communication among undergraduate students. This gap creates the need for empirical evidence on the relationships among these variables. It is against this background that this study examined therapoetics in digital spaces: social media storytelling and mental health conversations among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.

Aim and Objectives the Study

The main of the study was to examine the relationship between social media storytelling and mental health conversations among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine the relationship between personal storytelling and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.
2. Determine the relationship between sharing of lived experiences and emotional support among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.
3. Ascertain the relationship between narrative expression and help-seeking communication among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between personal storytelling and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities?
2. What is the relationship between sharing of lived experiences and emotional support among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities?
3. What is the relationship between narrative expression and help-seeking communication among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities?

Null Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between personal storytelling and mental health awareness among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.
2. There is no significant relationship between sharing of lived experiences and emotional support among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.

3. There is no significant relationship between narrative expression and help-seeking communication among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities.

Methodology

The study employed a correlational research design in order to ascertain the extent and direction of relationships between specific dimensions of social media narrative and dimensions of mental health conversations without modifying the variables. The research was conducted at the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE) and Rivers State University (RSU) in Rivers State, Nigeria. During the 2025/2026 academic session, the population consisted of 346 undergraduate students. This was composed of 217 students from the Department of Mass Communication at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and 129 students from the Department of Mass Communication at Rivers State University. Census sampling was implemented due to the manageable nature of the population, which included all 346 students as the intended sample and study population. 321 of the 346 questionnaires that were administered were successfully completed and retrieved, resulting in a retrieval rate of 92.8%. These questionnaires were subsequently analysed. Two structured questionnaires, the Social Media Storytelling Questionnaire (SMSQ) and the Mental Health Conversations Questionnaire (MHCQ), were employed to gather data. The MHCQ assessed mental-health awareness, emotional support, and help-seeking communication, while the SMSQ assessed personal narration, sharing of lived experiences, and narrative expression. The two instruments were designed to be scored on a four-point Likert scale, which included Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The instruments were subjected to face and content validation by experts in relevant fields. Cronbach's alpha was employed to determine reliability, with a coefficient of 0.70 or higher being considered acceptable. The actual alpha coefficients should be reported from the completed reliability analysis and should not be estimated or invented. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to analyse the data from the 321 retrieved questionnaires. The relationship between personal storytelling and mental-health awareness, the sharing of lived experiences and emotional support, and narrative expression and help-seeking communication was determined using PPMC. The null hypotheses were evaluated at the 0.05 level of significance. The decision rule required that the null hypothesis be rejected when the p-value was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), which indicates a statistically significant relationship, and retained when the p-value was greater than or equal to 0.05 ($p \geq 0.05$), which indicates that the relationship was not statistically significant.

Analysis of Data and Results

Research Question and Hypothesis 1: Table and Interpretation of Result

Table 1: Relationship between Personal Storytelling and Mental Health Awareness among Undergraduate Students in Rivers State Universities (N = 321)

	Personal Storytelling	Mental Health Awareness
Personal Storytelling		
Pearson Correlation	1	.684
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	321	321
Mental Health Awareness		
Pearson Correlation	.684	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
N	321	321

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

Undergraduates at universities in Rivers State were asked to share stories about themselves in order to raise awareness about mental health issues. Table 1 displays the computed coefficient (r) value of these replies. According to the data in the table, there is a high and positive correlation between undergraduates' understanding of mental health issues and their ability to share personal stories ($r = 0.684$). Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p-value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p-value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). This data suggests that undergraduates at Rivers State colleges are more cognisant of mental health issues when they hear stories about their own experiences.

Research Question and Hypothesis 2: Table and Interpretation of Result

Table 2: Relationship between Sharing of Lived Experiences and Emotional Support among Undergraduate Students in Rivers State Universities (N = 321)

	Sharing of Lived Experiences	Emotional Support
Sharing of Lived Experiences		
Pearson Correlation	1	.721
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	321	321
Emotional Support		
Pearson Correlation	.721	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
N	321	321

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

Table 2 shows the calculated coefficient (r) value of responses of undergraduate students to determine whether there is a relationship between sharing of lived experiences and emotional support among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities. The computed r-value of 0.721 in the table demonstrates that there is a positive and significant link between undergraduates' sharing of personal experiences and emotional support from others at institutions in Rivers State. Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p-value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p-value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). This suggests that undergraduates at Rivers State colleges benefit emotionally by talking to one another about real-life experiences.

Research Question and Hypothesis 3: Table and Interpretation of Result

Table 3: Relationship between Narrative Expression and Help-Seeking Communication among Undergraduate Students in Rivers State Universities (N = 321)

	Narrative Expression	Help-Seeking Communication
Narrative Expression		
Pearson Correlation	1	.756
Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
N	321	321
Help-Seeking Communication		
Pearson Correlation	.756	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
N	321	321

Source: Researcher's Field Survey (2026)

Table 3 shows the calculated coefficient (r) value of responses of undergraduate students to determine whether there is a relationship between narrative expression and help-seeking communication among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities. There is a high and positive correlation between narrative expression and help-seeking communication among undergraduate students in Rivers State colleges, as seen in the table where the computed r was 0.756. Additionally, at the 0.05 level of significance, the table displays a p -value of .001. We may say that we rejected the null hypothesis since the p -value is smaller than the significance level (0.05). What this means is that undergraduates at Rivers State colleges are more likely to express themselves narratively and communicate with one another when they need assistance.

Decision on the Three Hypotheses

Hypothesis	R	p	Decision
Ho ₁	.684	< .001	Rejected
Ho ₂	.721	< .001	Rejected
Ho ₃	.756	< .001	Rejected

Discussion of Findings

Undergraduate students at universities in Rivers State showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.684$, $p < .001$) between personal storytelling and mental-health awareness. According to the findings, there is a correlation between students' reported levels of personal storytelling and their reported levels of mental-health awareness. Ojewumi et al. (2025) investigated undergraduates' usage of social media, motivation, and awareness of mental health in Nigeria; Owolabi et al. (2024) emphasised the significance of media influencers in raising awareness of mental health among Nigerian students; and these findings are compatible with one another. One possible way to interpret the results is as evidence that personal tales have the power to normalise and shed light on mental health issues. The results should be seen as an association rather than proof that personal storytelling affects mental-health awareness; this is due to the fact that the study is correlational. The second discovery showed that there is a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.721$, $p < .001$) between sharing personal experiences and receiving emotional support. Students who report feeling more supported emotionally are also more likely to report sharing their lived experiences, according to this finding.

The findings corroborate those of Naslund et al. (2020), who noted that platforms like Facebook and Twitter can facilitate communication and offer emotional and psychological assistance. Additionally, it aligns with the findings of Ene et al. (2026), whose systematic research suggested that undergraduate students in Nigeria might benefit from social media activity in terms of increased social connectivity and peer support. This pairing may be an example of the ways in which digital narratives facilitate understanding, comfort, and connection with others. But, there are hazards associated with digital engagement, such as rejection and false information, so the social media's ability to help relies on the quality of the relationship. The third discovery showed that there is a strong positive correlation between telling stories and communicating the need for aid ($r = 0.756$, $p < .001$). Out of the three connections that were considered, this one was the strongest. Students who report more narrative expression also likely to report more help-seeking communication, according to the results. The findings are in line with what Ogundipe et al. (2025) found about the importance of digital health platforms for promoting mental health among college students and with what Aluh et al. (2019) found about the importance of mental health literacy. In narrative expression, students may find a welcoming place to talk about their problems, get answers to their questions, share their stories, and learn about resources that could help them. While this study does find a positive link between narrative expression and help-seeking, it does not prove that narrative expression causes help-seeking.

Conclusion

The study examined therapoetics in digital spaces, focusing on social media storytelling and mental health conversations among undergraduate students in Rivers State universities. The findings established significant positive relationships across all three dimensions examined. Personal storytelling was significantly related to mental-health awareness, sharing of lived experiences was significantly related to emotional support, and narrative expression was significantly related to help-seeking communication. Among the three relationships, narrative expression and help-seeking communication recorded the strongest correlation ($r = 0.756$). The study therefore concludes that social media storytelling represents an important communicative dimension of mental-health conversations among undergraduate students. Digital storytelling may provide opportunities for students to communicate experiences, encounter mental-health information, receive emotional support and communicate needs for assistance. However, such digital communication should be regarded as a complementary support and communication mechanism rather than a substitute for professional mental-health care.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Colleges and universities should discourage stigmatising, deceptive, or damaging material and encourage students to share stories that raise awareness about mental health.
2. University authorities should strengthen peer-support initiatives by creating safe digital and physical spaces where students can share experiences, receive appropriate emotional support and connect with relevant student-support services.
3. University counselling units and qualified mental-health professionals should utilise appropriate social-media platforms to provide credible mental-health information and create accessible channels for communicating concerns and obtaining guidance.
4. Universities should develop digital mental-health awareness programmes that help students recognise mental-health challenges, challenge stigma and understand when and where to seek professional assistance.
5. Students should be encouraged to practise responsible narrative expression by protecting personal privacy, avoiding harmful or misleading mental-health information and directing serious concerns to qualified professionals rather than relying exclusively on social-media responses.
6. University management should establish clear referral mechanisms linking digital mental-health conversations with counselling and professional support services so that students who communicate serious concerns can be appropriately guided.
7. Future researchers should examine additional dimensions of digital storytelling and mental-health communication among students in other universities and geographical contexts to broaden evidence on the role of therapoetics in digital spaces.

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