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Ainsi à l'image de ce bel oiseau, la Revue interdisciplinaire BEYRA ambitionne de publier des articles scientifiques inédits au confluent des Sciences de la Communication, du Langage, des Lettres et des Langues. Logée au sein de l'UFR des Lettres et des Arts de l'Université Peleforo GON COULIBALY, la Revue interdisciplinaire BEYRA publie des contributions théoriques ou des résultats de recherches de terrain des Chercheurs, Enseignants-Chercheurs et Étudiants des champs disciplinaires ci-dessus énumérés.

La Revue scientifique interdisciplinaire BEYRA transcende les frontières pour donner la possibilité aux Chercheurs, Enseignants-Chercheurs et Etudiants de tous les horizons de soumettre des travaux originaux et inédits. Dans cette dynamique, la Revue interdisciplinaire BEYRA lance pour chaque numéro des appels à contributions à travers les canaux de diffusion existants.

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Exemples :

– En effet, le but poursuivi par M. Ascher (1998, p. 223), est « d’élargir l’histoire des mathématiques de telle sorte qu’elle acquière une perspective multiculturelle et globale (...), d’accroître le domaine des mathématiques : alors qu’elle s’est pour l’essentiel occupée du groupe professionnel occidental que l’on appelle les mathématiciens (...) ».

– Pour dire plus amplement ce qu’est cette capacité de la société civile, qui dans son déploiement effectif, atteste qu’elle peut porter le développement et l’histoire, S. B. Diagne (1991, p. 2) écrit :

Qu’on ne s’y trompe pas : de toute manière, les populations ont toujours su opposer à la philosophie de l’encadrement et à son volontarisme leurs propres stratégies de contournements. Celles-là, par exemple, sont lisibles dans le dynamisme, ou à tout le moins, dans la créativité dont sait preuve ce que l’on désigne sous le nom de secteur informel et à qui il faudra donner l’appellation positive d’économie populaire.

- Le philosophe ivoirien a raison, dans une certaine mesure, de lire, dans ce choc déstabilisateur, le processus du sous-développement. Ainsi qu’il le dit :

le processus du sous-développement résultant de ce choc est vécu concrètement par les populations concernées comme une crise globale : crise socio-économique (exploitation brutale, chômage permanent, exode accéléré et douloureux), mais aussi crise socio-culturelle et de civilisation traduisant une impréparation sociohistorique et une inadaptation des cultures et des comportements humains aux formes de vie imposées par les technologies étrangères. (S. Diakité, 1985, p. 105).

Les sources historiques, les références d’informations orales et les notes explicatives sont numérotées en série continue et présentées en bas de page.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADOLESCENTS SELF-EDUCATION IN BURKINA FASO : LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND INFORMATION RISKS

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Abstract

Across Africa, adolescents increasingly use social media platforms especially YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram—not only for entertainment but also for self-education: revising school subjects, learning languages, acquiring digital skills, exploring careers, and joining peer learning communities. Yet the same platforms expose young users to information risks (misinformation, low-quality “tutorials,” persuasive content), attention fragmentation, and uneven learning outcomes. This article synthesizes an Africa-relevant conceptual framework and proposes a mixed-methods design to examine (i) dominant self-learning practices, (ii) conditions that support effective autonomous learning, and (iii) risks that undermine learning quality. We argue that social media can expand informal learning opportunities, particularly where schools face resource constraints, if adolescents develop media and information literacy, benefit from light-touch adult guidance, and practice self-regulation. Policy recommendations focus on integrating information-verification routines and structured digital learning habits into school and community programs, aligned with African education priorities.

Key words : Social media, Self-education, Adolescents, Information risks, Burkina Faso.

Résumé

Partout en Afrique, les adolescents utilisent de plus en plus les plateformes de médias sociaux, en particulier YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook et Instagram, non seulement pour se divertir mais aussi pour s'auto-éduquer réviser des matières scolaires, apprendre des langues, acquérir des compétences numériques, explorer des carrières et rejoindre des communautés d'apprentissage par les pairs. Pourtant, ces mêmes plateformes exposent les jeunes utilisateurs à des risques liés à l'information (désinformation, « tutoriels » de mauvaise qualité, contenu persuasif), à une fragmentation de l'attention et à des résultats d'apprentissage inégaux. Cet article synthétise un cadre conceptuel pertinent pour l'Afrique et propose une conception à méthodes mixtes pour examiner (i) les pratiques dominantes d'auto-apprentissage, (ii) les conditions qui soutiennent un apprentissage autonome efficace et (iii) les risques qui nuisent à la qualité de l'apprentissage. Nous soutenons que les médias sociaux peuvent accroître les opportunités d'apprentissage informel, en particulier là où les écoles sont confrontées à des contraintes de ressources, si les adolescents développent des connaissances médiatiques et informationnelles, bénéficient d'une orientation légère par les adultes et pratiquent l'autorégulation. Les recommandations politiques se concentrent sur l'intégration de routines de vérification des informations et d'habitudes d'apprentissage numérique structurées dans les programmes scolaires et communautaires, alignés sur les priorités éducatives africaines.

Mots clés : Médias sociaux, Auto-éducation, Adolescents, Risques informationnels, Burkina Faso.

Introduction

Across many African education systems, adolescents' access to formal learning resources remains uneven. Textbooks are often insufficient, private tutoring is costly, and classrooms are frequently overcrowded, limiting individualized support. In this context of structural constraints, young people increasingly turn to alternative pathways to learn, enabled by the rapid expansion of mobile connectivity. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok have become everyday infrastructures not only for communication and entertainment but also for information seeking and learning. This transformation has given rise to a growing phenomenon of self-education through social media, whereby adolescents acquire knowledge and skills outside formal schooling by watching short explanatory videos, following educational accounts, participating in peer-based revision groups, or troubleshooting academic difficulties through online networks.

The appeal of social media-based self-education is considerable. These platforms offer low-cost, on-demand micro-learning opportunities that are particularly attractive in resource-constrained settings. Adolescents can replay explanations at their own pace, visualize abstract concepts through animations, practice language pronunciation using short clips, or access tutorials in areas such as science, mathematics, graphic design, or basic coding. In many cases, social media functions as an informal learning scaffold, compensating, at least partially, for gaps in school-based instruction or limited family support. For learners facing educational disruptions, large class sizes, or limited instructional materials, these digital practices may enhance autonomy and sustain engagement with learning.

However, this expanding reliance on social media for self-education is shaped by significant tensions. First, visibility does not equate to pedagogical quality. Content that is popular, highly shared, or visually appealing is not necessarily accurate, conceptually sound, or aligned with curricular standards. Adolescents may therefore internalize explanations that are oversimplified, misleading, or contextually inappropriate. Second, social media platforms operate within an attention economy designed to maximize engagement rather than learning. Adolescents seeking educational content are simultaneously exposed to distractions, persuasive influencers, algorithmic recommendations, and unverified claims, which can fragment attention and blur the boundary between learning and entertainment.

These challenges have become a growing concern within global and Africa-focused education policy debates, particularly those emphasizing foundational learning, equity, and youth protection. Increasing attention is being paid to the importance of media and information literacy, self-regulation skills, and supportive learning ecosystems that can help adolescents benefit from digital opportunities while minimizing risks. Existing Africa-related studies indicate that learners frequently prefer social media tools especially WhatsApp—for informal learning interactions, often valuing their accessibility and peer-oriented communication over formal learning management systems. At the same time, international evidence highlights complex relationships between social media use and academic outcomes, including negative associations linked to distraction, sleep disruption, and exposure to low-quality information. These findings underscore the need to distinguish productive educational uses of social media from high-risk consumption patterns. Against this backdrop, there is a clear need for analytically grounded and empirically testable frameworks that capture both the opportunities and the vulnerabilities of adolescents' self-education on social media in African contexts. This article seeks to contribute an Africa-relevant framework for analyzing adolescents'

self-education through social media, with particular attention to learning outcomes, enabling conditions, and information-related risks. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What kinds of knowledge and skills do adolescents report acquiring through social media (e.g., school subjects, languages, digital or entrepreneurial skills)?
- RQ2: What conditions are associated with higher-quality self-learning experiences (e.g., self-regulation, verification habits, peer support, adult guidance)?
- RQ3: What risks most undermine learning through social media (e.g., misinformation, low-quality content, distraction, harmful social dynamics)?

By examining these questions, the study aims to inform educational practice and policy on how social media can be better integrated into adolescent learning ecosystems while safeguarding learners from information and psychosocial risks.

1. Theoretical framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining informal and self-directed learning theories, learning ecology approaches, media and information literacy, and socio-cultural theories of mediation to analyze adolescents' self-education through social media in African contexts. Rather than conceptualizing social media as an inherently educational or harmful tool, the framework approaches it as a conditional learning environment, whose effects depend on learners' regulatory capacities, social mediation, and epistemic resources.

1.1. Informal learning and self-directed learning in digital contexts

Informal learning refers to learning processes that occur outside formal educational and non-formal educational institutions and are often learner-initiated, experience-based, and embedded in everyday activities (D. W. Livingstone, 2001; D. Schugurensky, 2007). Non-formal learning is characterized by volunteering and orientation towards the needs and interests of learners. It is flexible and its participatory pedagogy aims to develop autonomy and practical skills for life. In African contexts marked by limited instructional resources, informal learning has long complemented schooling by enabling learners to acquire practical knowledge through observation, interaction, and peer exchange. This study also builds on theories of self-directed learning (M. S. Knowles, 1975), which emphasize learners' ability to diagnose learning needs, identify resources, and evaluate learning outcomes. However, research has shown that self-directed learning presupposes cognitive and metacognitive capacities that are unevenly distributed, particularly among adolescents (B. Zimmerman, 2002). When transposed to social media environments, self-directed learning becomes structurally constrained by algorithmic curation, commercial incentives, and unequal epistemic authority (J. van Dijck, 2013). Adolescents may initiate learning activities, but they do not fully control the informational architectures that shape exposure and attention.

1.2. Learning ecologies and digital affordances

To account for these dynamics, the study adopts a learning ecology perspective (B. Barron, 2006; N. Jackson, 2013), which conceptualizes learning as emerging from interactions among individuals, tools, social relationships, and institutional contexts. From this viewpoint, social media platforms constitute complex learning ecologies rather than neutral repositories of information. Digital affordances such as replayability, multimodal explanations, peer feedback, and short-form

instructional videos can scaffold learning, particularly in under-resourced educational systems (C. Greenhow & C. Lewin, 2016). At the same time, these affordances may fragment attention and promote superficial engagement (N. Carr, 2010). The learning ecology framework thus enables a non-deterministic analysis, emphasizing that platforms shape conditions of possibility rather than directly causing learning outcomes.

1.3. Media and information literacy as epistemic regulation

A central concept in this framework is media and information literacy (MIL), defined as the ability to access, evaluate, verify, and ethically use information across media environments (UNESCO, 2013). Research has shown that MIL plays a critical role in distinguishing productive digital learning from exposure to misinformation and cognitive overload (S. Wineburg & S. McGrew, 2017). In this study, verification practices—such as cross-checking sources, questioning credibility, and consulting trusted adults or peers—are conceptualized as epistemic regulation mechanisms (Bråten et al., 2011). Without these mechanisms, adolescents may conflate popularity with credibility and visibility with truth, a risk heightened by the persuasive and affect-driven logic of social media platforms (boyd, 2014).

1.4. Socio-cultural mediation and guided autonomy

The framework further draws on socio-cultural theories of learning, particularly L. S. Vygotsky's (1978) notion that learning is mediated by social interaction, language, and cultural tools. Even when learning appears individualized, it remains socially situated and shaped by relationships with peers, teachers, and family members. The concept of guided autonomy (P. A. Kirschner, J. Sweller, & R. E. Clark, 2006) is particularly relevant in adolescent digital learning. While social media enables exploratory and autonomous learning, research shows that unguided learning environments disproportionately disadvantage learners with fewer prior resources. In African contexts, where intergenerational guidance and community-based knowledge transmission remain significant (R. Serpell, 2011), the absence of mediation can transform autonomy into isolation and vulnerability.

Taken together, this theoretical framework conceptualizes adolescents' self-education through social media as a situated, mediated, and unequal learning process. It provides the analytical lens for examining learning opportunities, enabling conditions, and information risks, and grounds the empirical analysis that follows.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in order to capture both the breadth and depth of adolescents' self-educational practices on social media. The choice of a mixed approach was motivated by the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation : while quantitative data make it possible to identify dominant patterns of platform use and self-reported learning outcomes, qualitative data are essential for understanding how adolescents actually learn, verify information, regulate their attention, and navigate risks in everyday digital environments. Combining these approaches allowed for triangulation of findings and strengthened the interpretive validity of the results.

The study was conducted across three contrasting settings an urban center, a secondary town, and a peri-urban or rural area in order to reflect inequalities in digital access and educational resources commonly observed in African contexts. The participant sample consisted of 240 adolescents aged 13 to 18, selected using stratified sampling to ensure balance across gender, school level, and degree of internet access. In addition, 20 teachers and 15 parents or caregivers were included as key informants, providing complementary perspectives on adolescents' learning behaviors, cognitive engagement, and exposure to online risks. This multi-actor design made it possible to situate adolescents' self-education practices within broader family and school ecosystems.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to adolescent participants. The instrument examined frequency and purposes of social media use, types of learning activities undertaken (such as revising school subjects, following tutorials, or engaging in peer support), and self-perceived learning outcomes. Particular attention was paid to indicators of learning quality, including practices of repetition, note-taking, application of knowledge, and peer explanation. The questionnaire also included items measuring information-verification behaviors, such as cross-checking sources, consulting trusted adults, or comparing multiple online explanations, as well as indicators of self-regulation, including time management and control of notifications during study periods. To complement self-reported data, adolescents completed short scenario-based tasks designed to assess their ability to evaluate the credibility of online information. These tasks presented realistic social media posts related to education, health, or career guidance and asked participants to identify which content appeared most reliable and to justify their choice. This method provided insight into adolescents' information discernment skills without requiring access to private digital data.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with adolescents, teachers, and parents. Adolescent interviews focused on concrete learning experiences, such as learning a specific skill or concept through social media, the strategies used to understand and retain information, and the challenges encountered. Teachers and parents were asked about observable changes in adolescents' learning behaviors, attention, and motivation, as well as perceived benefits and risks of social media-based learning. In addition, a non-intrusive observation of publicly accessible educational pages, channels, and groups frequently cited by participants was conducted to contextualize reported practices. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses to explore relationships between learning outcomes and key predictors such as verification habits, self-regulation, and peer support. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis, allowing recurrent patterns related to learning pathways, information risks, and regulatory strategies to emerge inductively. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage, enabling a nuanced understanding of how social media simultaneously functions as a resource for self-education and a site of informational vulnerability. Given that the study involved minors, strict ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the research process. Written parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained prior to participation. All data were anonymized, and no private messages, personal accounts, or identifiable digital traces were collected. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and referral mechanisms were prepared in the event that discussions revealed exposure to serious online harm. These measures ensured that the study adhered to ethical standards for research with adolescents in digital environments.

3. Results

To enhance the readability and analytical clarity of the findings, the results are presented through a combination of tables and figures. These visual elements synthesize adolescents' reported uses of social media for self-education, the types of learning involved, and the profiles of information-verification practices that shape learning quality. Together, they allow for a structured interpretation of how social media function as informal learning environments, while also highlighting the risks associated with unregulated and non-critical use.

3.1. Reported knowledge and skills acquired through social media

Table 1 shows that YouTube and WhatsApp are the most widely used platforms for self-education among adolescents, although they serve different pedagogical functions.

Table 1. Social media platforms used for self-education by adolescents (%)

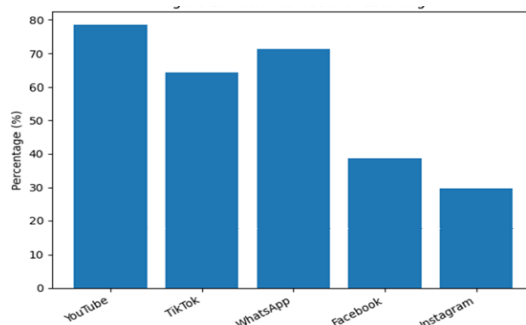
Platform	Learning use (%)	Main educational functions reported
YouTube	78.5	Tutorials, explanations, revision videos
TikTok	64.2	Short learning clips, language practice
WhatsApp	71.3	Peer discussion, homework help, exam revision
Facebook	38.6	Study pages, career information
Instagram	29.8	Study tips, motivational content

Source : Data collected in april 2025

YouTube is primarily used as an explanatory medium, allowing learners to revisit content at their own pace, while WhatsApp functions as a peer-learning infrastructure, facilitating collaborative problem-solving and social support.

TikTok's strong presence reflects adolescents' preference for short, accessible learning formats, though its educational value depends heavily on content quality and user regulation. Instagram is visibly the least used among the 5 networks.

Figure 1. Distribution of social media platforms used for self-education among adolescents.



Source : Data collected in april 2025

The figure highlights the coexistence of individualized learning (YouTube, TikTok) and social learning (WhatsApp), reinforcing the idea that adolescents' self-education is both cognitive and relational in nature.

3.2. The conditions associated with higher quality self-learning experiences

Table 2 indicates that adolescents primarily use social media to **support formal schooling**, especially to clarify lessons they did not fully understand in class.

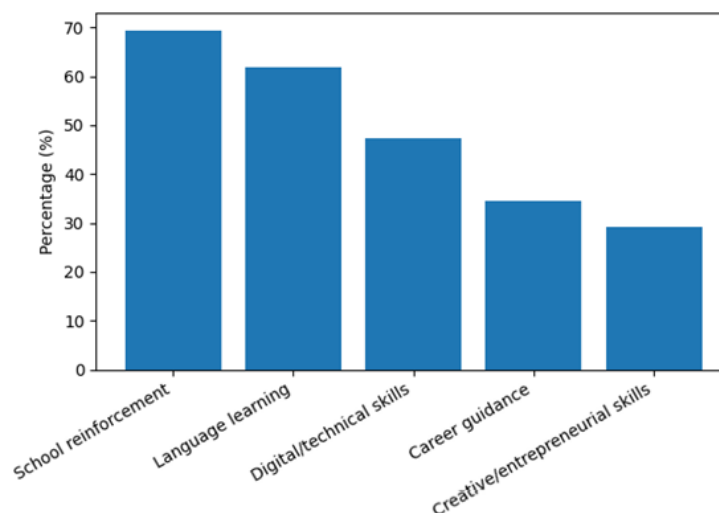
Table 2. Types of Learning Reported by Adolescents via Social Media (%)

Learning domain	Percentage of adolescents
School subject reinforcement	69.4
Language learning	61.8
Digital and technical skills	47.2
Career guidance and orientation	34.6
Creative and entrepreneurial skills	29.1

Source : Data collected in april 2025

Language learning emerges as a major area of autonomous engagement, reflecting both global digital trends and the multilingual realities of African education systems. The presence of digital, creative, and entrepreneurial learning underscores the role of social media in expanding adolescents' horizons beyond the school curriculum.

Figure 2. Types of learning acquired through social media



Source : Data collected in april 2025

While academic reinforcement remains dominant, the figure reveals a gradual shift toward skills-oriented and future-focused learning, suggesting that adolescents perceive social media as a space for both immediate academic support and long-term self-development.

Table 3 monstres a clear relationship between information verification and learning quality. Adolescents who systematically verify information are significantly more likely to report durable and transferable learning outcomes.

Table 3. Relationship between verification practices and reported learning quality

Verification profile	Durable learning reported (%)	Superficial reported (%) learning
Critical verifiers	72.4	27.6
Partial verifiers	48.1	51.9
Non-verifiers	29.3	70.7

Source : Data collected in april 2025

Conversely, non-verifiers overwhelmingly report superficial understanding, confirming that access to information alone does not guarantee meaningful learning.

3.3. The biggest risks involved in learning via social media

Table 4 highlights a major vulnerability in adolescents' self-education practices. While approximately one quarter of participants demonstrate strong verification habits, nearly one third rely on superficial indicators of credibility such as popularity metrics.

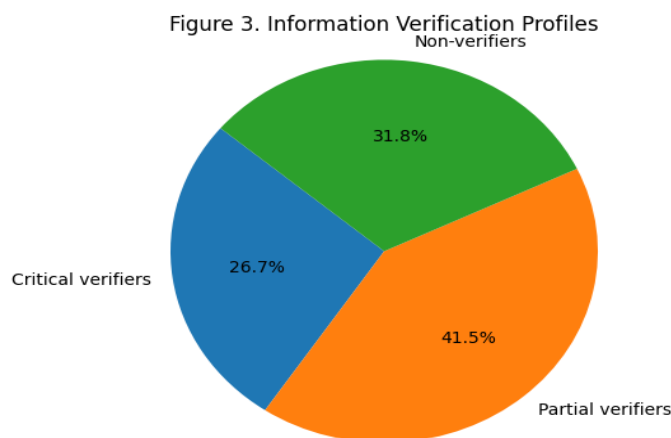
Table 4. Profiles of Information Verification Practices (%)

Verification profile	Description	Percentage
Critical verifiers	Cross-check sources, consult adults/peers	26.7
Partial verifiers	Occasionally compare sources	41.5
Non-verifiers	Rely on likes/views or first result	31.8

Source : Data collected in april 2025

This distribution suggests that learning quality is uneven and closely tied to adolescents' information literacy skills. Figure 3 makes visible the imbalance between critical and non-critical approaches to online information.

Figure 3. Distribution of information-verification profiles among adolescent social media learners.



Source : Data collected in april 2025

The sizeable proportion of non-verifiers points to the risk of misinformation shaping adolescents' learning trajectories, particularly in contexts where social media function as a primary source of educational content.

4. Analysis

Taken together, the tables and figures show that social media constitute a powerful but stratified learning space for African adolescents. While platforms offer unprecedented access to educational content and peer support, the effectiveness of self-education is strongly mediated by verification practices, self-regulation, and learning strategies. These findings provide a strong empirical basis for the discussion that follows, which situates adolescents' self-education within broader debates on media literacy, cognitive engagement, and educational equity in African contexts.

The results of this study highlight the central role that social media platforms now play in adolescents' self-education across the investigated African contexts. Far from being limited to entertainment, social media have become informal learning environments in which adolescents actively seek knowledge, develop skills, and construct learning strategies outside formal schooling. However, these practices are marked by significant variations in quality, depth, and associated risks. Overall, the findings indicate that a large majority of adolescents reported using social media for learning-related purposes at least several times per week. Among the platforms most frequently cited, YouTube and TikTok emerged as the primary sources for explanatory content and tutorials, particularly in mathematics, science, language learning, and practical digital skills such as video editing or graphic design. WhatsApp played a distinct and complementary role, functioning mainly as a peer-based learning space where adolescents exchanged notes, asked questions, shared explanations, and coordinated exam preparation. Facebook and Instagram were used more sporadically for educational purposes, often through pages or accounts dedicated to study tips or career guidance. These patterns were consistent across sites, although adolescents in urban settings reported more diversified platform use than their peers in peri-urban and rural areas.

In terms of types of learning, adolescents' self-education practices clustered around three main domains. First, many participants used social media to reinforce formal school learning, particularly to clarify lessons they did not fully understand in class. Short videos and peer explanations were frequently described as helping them “understand differently” or “at their own pace.” Second, language learning constituted a major area of autonomous engagement, especially for English and French, where adolescents reported practicing pronunciation, acquiring vocabulary, and improving listening comprehension through repeated exposure to short clips. Third, a substantial proportion of participants described learning non-curricular skills, including digital competencies, entrepreneurship-related skills, and creative practices. These forms of learning were often perceived as more motivating and immediately useful than school-based knowledge.

Despite this apparent richness of learning opportunities, the results reveal important disparities in the quality of self-education. Adolescents who reported meaningful learning outcomes such as being able to explain a concept, apply a skill independently, or help peers tended to engage in structured learning behaviors. These included replaying educational content, taking notes, practicing tasks offline, and discussing what they learned with friends or siblings. By contrast, adolescents who mainly consumed learning-related content passively, without repetition or application, reported more superficial understanding and difficulty transferring knowledge to school tasks.

A key differentiating factor between these groups was the presence of information-verification practices. Adolescents who described checking multiple sources, comparing explanations, or consulting teachers and knowledgeable peers were significantly more likely to report durable learning outcomes. In contrast, a sizeable proportion of participants admitted relying on popularity indicators such as likes, views, or follower counts to judge the credibility of content. Scenario-based tasks confirmed these tendencies: while some adolescents demonstrated clear reasoning when identifying reliable information, others struggled to distinguish between accurate explanations and misleading or oversimplified content. This finding points to uneven development of media and information literacy skills among adolescents. The results also reveal notable cognitive and attentional challenges associated with self-education on social media. Many adolescents reported difficulty maintaining focus when learning online, citing constant notifications, algorithm-driven distractions, and the temptation to switch rapidly between educational and entertainment content. Teachers and parents corroborated these observations, frequently describing fragmented attention, rapid fatigue, and inconsistent retention of learned material. These challenges were particularly pronounced among adolescents who reported long daily exposure to social media without clear learning schedules or adult guidance.

Finally, the study identified several information and psychosocial risks linked to social media-based self-education. In addition to misinformation and low-quality content, adolescents reported exposure to contradictory advice, unrealistic success narratives, and, in some cases, harmful peer comparison. While most participants demonstrated a degree of awareness of these risks, only a minority reported having received explicit guidance either at school or at home on how to manage them effectively. This gap underscores the vulnerability of adolescents who rely heavily on social media as a primary learning resource without sufficient support structures.

The study suggests that social media function as a powerful but uneven educational space for African adolescents. They offer expanded access to knowledge and skills, particularly in resource-constrained contexts, yet simultaneously expose learners to significant informational and cognitive risks. The effectiveness of adolescents' self-education depends less on platform access alone than on

the presence of self-regulation strategies, verification practices, and supportive learning environments.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine adolescents' self-education through social media in an African context, with particular attention to learning opportunities, enabling conditions, and information-related risks. The findings highlight a central result : social media does not function as an educational resource *per se*, but as a conditional learning environment, whose pedagogical value depends on learners' regulatory capacities, verification practices, and the presence of social and institutional mediation.

The results confirm that social media platforms have become significant sites of informal learning for adolescents, especially in contexts marked by limited access to textbooks, tutoring, and individualized classroom support. Adolescents reported acquiring academic knowledge, language skills, and practical competencies through short videos, peer-based WhatsApp groups, and online tutorials. These findings resonate with African studies showing that learners often prefer accessible, peer-oriented digital spaces for learning interactions over formal learning management systems. However, the data also demonstrate that access alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful learning. In line with learning ecology perspectives, adolescents' learning outcomes are shaped by the interaction between digital affordances and learners' cognitive, social, and ethical dispositions. Social media thus operates as a *learning ecology* in which educational potential and risk coexist, rather than as a neutral or uniformly beneficial tool.

One of the study's most significant contributions lies in identifying verification practices as a key predictor of learning quality. Adolescents who reported systematic verification strategies cross-checking information, consulting teachers or peers, and comparing multiple sources were significantly more likely to report deeper understanding and sustained learning. Conversely, non-verifiers tended to engage in superficial consumption of content, often equating popularity or visual appeal with credibility. This finding extends existing literature that primarily links social media use to academic outcomes through indicators such as time spent online or frequency of use. Instead, the present study demonstrates that how adolescents evaluate information matters more than how often they access platforms. From a theoretical standpoint, this supports media and information literacy frameworks that conceptualize learning as a process of critical meaning-making rather than passive reception. In African contexts, where misinformation circulates widely and formal guidance may be limited, verification emerges as a crucial cognitive and ethical competence. The absence of such skills increases vulnerability to low-quality content, misleading explanations, and harmful advice, with direct consequences for learning trajectories and psychosocial well-being.

The findings further underscore the role of self-regulation in mediating educational outcomes. Adolescents who reported goal-oriented use of social media setting learning intentions, limiting distractions, and managing screen time were more likely to benefit academically. In contrast, unregulated use was associated with fragmented attention, superficial engagement, and diminished learning returns. Peer support also plays an ambivalent role. WhatsApp study groups and peer exchanges often function as informal scaffolding mechanisms, enabling learners to clarify concepts and sustain motivation. Yet, without adult guidance or shared norms of verification, these same peer spaces can amplify misinformation or normalize low academic standards. This duality highlights the importance of guided autonomy, where adolescents retain agency in their learning while benefiting from supportive oversight by teachers, parents, or trained mentors.

The study also confirms that social media based self-education is accompanied by substantial risks. Misinformation, distraction, exposure to persuasive influencers, and algorithm-driven content flows undermine learning quality and can exacerbate cognitive overload. These risks are particularly salient for adolescents experiencing educational vulnerability, emotional distress, or limited adult supervision. Importantly, the findings caution against romanticizing informal digital learning as a substitute for formal education. While social media can compensate for certain resource gaps, it cannot replace structured pedagogy, curricular coherence, or professional guidance. Instead, it should be understood as a supplementary learning space, whose benefits depend on integration within broader educational ecosystems.

From a policy perspective, the findings call for a shift away from binary debates that frame social media either as a threat or a solution. The evidence supports a more nuanced approach centered on capacity-building rather than restriction. Media and information literacy, critical verification skills, and self-regulated learning strategies should be explicitly integrated into school curricula and teacher training programs. For educators, the results suggest the need to acknowledge adolescents' existing digital learning practices and to engage them pedagogically, rather than ignoring or prohibiting them. For families and communities, fostering spaces of dialogue and trusted guidance is essential to counter the risks associated with unmoderated online advice.

This study contributes to African educational research by empirically demonstrating that learning through social media is not determined by platforms themselves, but by the conditions under which adolescents engage with them. By foregrounding verification practices and self-regulation, it advances a more precise understanding of digital learning inequalities. Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. Self-reported learning outcomes may be subject to social desirability bias, and the findings reflect a specific national context. Future research could combine longitudinal designs, learning assessments, and comparative studies across African settings to deepen understanding of these dynamics.

Overall, the findings invite a reconceptualization of adolescents' digital learning practices not as marginal or deviant, but as central components of contemporary learning ecosystems that require ethical, pedagogical, and institutional support.

Conclusion

This study set out to address a central educational problematic in contemporary African contexts : how and under what conditions social media contribute to adolescents' self-education, while simultaneously exposing them to significant information-related risks. Against a backdrop of unequal access to educational resources and the rapid expansion of mobile connectivity, adolescents increasingly rely on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp as informal learning spaces. The core objective of the study was therefore to analyze adolescents' self-educational practices on social media, assess the quality of learning outcomes generated, and identify the factors that differentiate effective autonomous learning from superficial or risky engagement. The results show that social media are widely mobilized for learning purposes. More than 70% of adolescents reported using YouTube and WhatsApp for educational activities, primarily to reinforce school subjects and develop language skills, while nearly half engaged in the acquisition of digital or technical competencies. These findings confirm that social media have become key components of adolescents' learning ecologies. However, the study also reveals substantial disparities in learning quality. Only 26.7% of participants demonstrated strong information-verification practices, whereas 31.8% relied largely on popularity indicators such as views or likes to assess credibility. Crucially,

adolescents who systematically verified information were more than twice as likely to report durable and transferable learning outcomes compared to non-verifiers.

These results directly address the study's objectives by demonstrating that the educational value of social media is not inherent to the platforms themselves, but depends on adolescents' cognitive regulation, verification strategies, and the presence of supportive learning environments. While social media can partially compensate for structural weaknesses in formal education systems, they also amplify epistemic and cognitive risks when used without guidance. To end, social media should be understood as conditional educational resources rather than automatic solutions to learning challenges. Strengthening media and information literacy, fostering structured self-regulation, and embedding guided digital learning practices within schools and communities are essential to ensure that adolescents' self-education through social media supports equitable, reliable, and meaningful learning across Africa.

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