

Social Media Enculturation of Prank Contents and Viewers` Mental Health Among Mcpherson University Undergraduates Ogun State

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Abstract:

This study examined the psychological effects of prank-based of social media content on Nigerian viewers, exploring its dual role as entertainment and a potential mental health concern. Using a quantitative type of research with survey approach and questionnaire as an instrument of data collection, data were collected from 397 social media users, predominantly young, educated students, via structured questionnaires. Findings reveal that respondents find prank videos amusing, experience anxiety or emotional distress, with noting risks of desensitization to real-life distress and reporting reduced trust in social interactions. Study further revealed that they use pranks for stress relief, though respondents only view them as comparable to other relaxation methods. Cultural values significantly shape perceptions, with evidence of opposing public humiliation pranks and significant number of respondents supporting regulation of harmful content. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications and Affective Disposition theories, the study highlights Nigeria's cultural emphasis on respect as a key moderator of viewer reactions. Despite limitations such as a youth-heavy sample and cross-sectional design, the findings contribute empirical evidence to the global discourse on social media's mental health impacts, advocating for ethical content creation and platform policies to mitigate harm while preserving pranks' entertainment value in Nigeria's digital landscape.

Keywords: Enculturation, mental health, social media contents, prank, viewers.

Introduction

The adoption of pranks as a disguised means of generating clicks and social media engagement by social media users has also created new opportunity which has formed one of the major contents on the social media that is generally design to draw public attention to handlers and meant to generate comments is a social media driving economy of pay-per-click or view. Sometimes, pranks as social media contents usually produced inform of videos or photograph of the action, usually to promote the images of the victims or bring them into ridicule on a social media space that made up of known and unknown friends.

In essence, these kinds of pranks occasionally go beyond their expected boundaries with some negative blows on the personalities of the victims whose motion or still photograph are being used in trending social media like Instagram, YouTube videos, Facebook, Tiktok that are uploaded by their intimate partners.

However, there are two schools of thought by scholars towards social media that, it is a two-edged sword cut that is either positively or negatively depending on the situation, at the time of use and direction it was channeled to by the users (AI- Harras & AI-Bads,2024). Social media pranks contents have often been used by Nigerian instagrams, facebook, Tiktok handlers. The storylines of most of the videos that is presented attract consumers' attention, such as doing things in public places that can surprise other people, making fun of other people, making people angry because they feel cheated or embarrassed or harmed. Also, there is another prank that is often carried out by public figures, social media celebrities which disguise themselves as poor or mentally imbalance people until they finally review their identity and then help other people who need help.

It is also noted that social media prank experienced higher level of depression, highlighting the profound psychological impact of such pranks. Social media prank can have significant societal and economics impact including mental health issues. Sometimes, prank can lead to decreased productivity, increase healthcare cost, and disrupted societal well-beings. On the other hands, negative effect of prank has also been highlighted which include social dynamics, fostering fear and distraction, especially when involving serious threat or public sharing (De-Choudbury et.al, 2025)

Social media has transformed the way people consume entertainment, with prank videos emerging as one of the most popular forms of digital content. These videos, often staged or

spontaneous, involve playful deception, surprise, or humor, making them highly engaging and widely shared on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. Ibe, Nzediegwu, and Ishiguzo (2023) established that prank is a joke played on someone who is not aware that he or she is being played or tricked. Prank as an absurd event, act, or behavior that is meant to make someone laugh or make fun of someone who isn't expecting to be the object of laughter or derision (Karpińska and Modliński, 2014). While some audiences find prank videos entertaining and a source of comic relief, others experience negative psychological effects such as irritation, anxiety, or discomfort. This dual type of psychological response necessitates questions on psychological impact of such content on well-being, especially in a highly booming digital market such as Nigeria, whose online and digital media uptake have exponentially increased in past years.

Reports from NOI polls (2019) reveals that a large portion of the population of Nigeria uses social media as a primary form of content consumption, as well as communication and entertainment. Since the advent of the internet, social media, and the coronavirus pandemic, there have been significant changes, as many Nigerian comedians now use the social media to engage with their audience Tekena & Anyanwu (2023). Something that went viral yesterday, a large mass populace will engage with today. Young Nigerians love posting and watching prank videos, where they often become a part of the prank themselves. Tekena and Anyanwu (2023) aver that pranks such as breaking phones and consuming cow dung or venomous insects have become viral on social media. Creators, in pursuit of instant fame and fortune, endanger their lives for views, likes, and popularity.

Cunningham and Craig (2019) social media has provided a platform for viral content, which indirectly gives rise to multiple career opportunities for entertainers-turned-content creators, including pranks. Some of the well-known Nigerian pranksters include *Trinity Guy*, *ZFancy*, *Untouchable*, *Machi gold*, and *flower boy*. These creators have amassed millions of followers by producing prank videos that range from harmless humor to elaborate and sometimes controversial stunts. *ZFancy*, for example, is known for his often extreme and sometimes fear-inducing pranks, which involve scaring unsuspecting people with staged supernatural or horror-themed setups.

Nigerian culture has a very important influence on how people react to prank videos.

Nigerian humor relies on storytelling, satire, and exaggeration, yet there are strict rules about respect, dignity, and boundaries. Because of this, some prank videos are enjoyed as creative and entertaining, while others become contentious, especially if they seem to be disrespectful, disturbing, or risky. Sabrina & Pranesh (2022) corroborate that although pranks are a major source of entertainment, they are never discussed for the complexity they bring about. This calls for a need to investigate how Nigerian audiences react to prank videos and the potential impacts on their mental health from consuming this type of content.

Prank videos can be divided into many different types, from harmless jokes to extreme or disturbing pranks. Harmless pranks, like simple jump scares or comedic misunderstandings, make people laugh and have fun without being too disturbing. Social experiment pranks, which record how people react in certain situations, might sometimes teach us something about social behavior. But scare pranks, public humiliation pranks, and extreme deception pranks cross the line. A case in point is the trend of pranksters staging fake kidnappings, arrests, or paranormal activities to elicit dramatic responses from their unsuspecting victims. In Nigeria, where security, kidnapping, and police brutality rank high among the nation's top issues, these kinds of pranks can be insensitive and even traumatic. Some pranksters, like Trinity guy and *ZFancy*, have been criticized for frightening people in their pranks. This is an issue regarding the mental well-being of the people pranked and viewers.

The popularity of prank videos is largely driven by psychological mechanisms that make them highly engaging. Humor plays a critical role in how prank videos are received. Freud (1905) in one of his works revealed that laughter provides psychological release, helping individuals relieve built-up stress and tension. This explains why many viewers turn to prank videos as a source of relaxation and comic relief. Similarly, McGraw & Warren (2010) suggests that humor arises when social norms are violated in a way that is perceived as non-threatening. However, humor is subjective, and what one viewer finds amusing may be distressing to another. In Nigeria, where humor often takes the form of satire, exaggeration, and playful banter, the line between acceptable and offensive pranks is shaped by cultural norms and individual perceptions.

Empathy is a significant factor in how audiences react to prank content. Some may develop secondhand embarrassment or apprehension, especially if prank videos feature humiliation, scare, or trickery. From the neuroscientific literature, the mirror neuron system of the brain enables individuals to empathize and experience feelings almost like the feelings of others. It is therefore no wonder that some audiences would feel uncomfortable or troubled watching pranks that incorporate painful experiences. Furthermore, moral disengagement influences the way audiences perceive prank content. While some defend pranks as harmless fun, others consider them to be morally wrong, especially when they involve deception, manipulation, or the possibility of inflicting injury.

Social media sites play a big part in the spread of prank culture. Social media sites like TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook utilize algorithms that show trending content based on how much people interact with it (Erika (2024)). Prank videos, which garner strong emotional reactions, get a high number of likes, shares, and comments and therefore are more likely to be very popular. Nigerian social media influencers and content creators depend on online activities to get attention and make a livelihood. Mukhijab and Noor (2023) submitted that prank videos are now tools for audience engagement and income generation. This, nevertheless, brings up issues of ethics as some creators go overboard with their jokes to get more popularity, making more extreme or polarizing pranks. Money from prank content can cause creators to focus more on surprising people than on doing what is right, damaging the emotional state of the people being pranked and of those watching.

The effect of prank videos on mental health differs from person to person. It relies on a person's sensitivity, personality, and experience. On the bright side, prank videos are funny to watch, which makes individuals unwind and feel happy. Research has shown that laughter can decrease cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and enhance mental health (Kramer and Leitao (2023)). But to others, prank videos are detrimental, and they make them feel anxious, irritated, or even less empathetic towards negative behavior. Repeatedly watching extreme prank videos can desensitize antisocial behavior, leading people to tolerate lying, manipulation, or humiliation as entertainment. In Nigeria, where people are still unaware of mental health, the psychological effect of watching distressing content is

often neglected. Some people who feel humiliated by prank videos might not express their feelings, hence making it harder to report the possible adverse effects of social media entertainment.

Additionally, individuals who have anxiety disorders or traumatic histories can be disturbed by some prank videos, especially those involving scare pranks or simulated emergencies. While some consumers learn coping mechanisms to filter out disturbing content, others might become more anxious or uneasy when they are exposed to prank videos that conflict with their personal or cultural values.

The study seeks to investigate how social media enculturation of prank contents and viewers' mental health among McPherson university undergraduates Ogun state. It also aims to look at how social media enculturation of prank contents affect viewers' mental health. This study will also evaluate the effectiveness of the social media enculturation of prank contents and how it affect viewers' mental health. By exploring these critical areas, this research aims to bridge the gap between social media enculturation of prank contents and how its effect viewers' mental health in Nigeria. However, studies have not been able to interrogate how social media enculturation of prank contents affect viewers mental health.

Statement of the Problem

The surge in social media prank content has transformed online entertainment, drawing millions of views worldwide and influencing digital culture in profound ways. However, while pranks are commonly perceived as harmless humor, emerging evidence indicates that they may inadvertently trigger adverse emotional and psychological responses among viewers. Repeated exposure to startling, ambiguous, or excessively staged pranks can evoke heightened states of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress, particularly when the line between genuine spontaneity and scripted performance is blurred. This discrepancy between intended humor and actual psychological impact presents a critical gap in our understanding of digital content consumption.

In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of social media usage has amplified this issue. Nigerian audiences, increasingly exposed to prank videos on platforms such as TikTok, YouTube,

and Instagram, are not only engaging with content that may undermine their emotional well-being but are also doing so within a cultural context where discussions about mental health remain limited and stigmatized. Furthermore, individual differences such as pre-existing mental health conditions and vulnerability to social comparison—may moderate the extent to which prank content affects psychological well-being. Despite the popularity of social media pranks, there is a paucity of systematic research that examines their short- and long-term effects on viewer mental health, particularly in the Nigerian context. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the relationship between social media pranks and viewer mental health, identify key moderating factors, and propose communication strategies that can mitigate these negative outcomes while preserving the creative and entertaining aspects of digital content.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the psychological effects of prank-based social media content on viewers' mental health.
2. To explore the potential of prank as a form of comic relief and its role in alleviating psychological stress among viewers.
3. To determine whether viewers perceive prank content as entertaining or distressing.

Research Questions

1. What are the psychological effects of prank-based social media content on viewers' mental health?
2. To what extent can prank videos serve as a therapeutic tool for psychological stress relief, and what mechanisms
3. Do viewers perceive prank content as entertaining or distressing, and what factors influence their perception?

Literature Review

Prank videos have gained widespread popularity on social media, raising concerns about their psychological effects on viewers. While some see them as lighthearted entertainment, others criticize them for causing distress, promoting desensitization, and reinforcing harmful social behaviors. This study builds upon the work of some noticeable scholars in

this area by introducing a new perspective on how social media enculturation of prank contents and viewers' mental health. Despite numerous studies on social media usage, limited attention has been paid to how social media enculturation of prank contents and how its effect viewers' mental health. This review synthesized key findings across multiple areas of social media usage, offering a comprehensive overview of social, legal and ethical considerations and mode of applications in Nigeria

The study by Sabrina & Pranesh (2022) explores the rise of pranks as social media content and their potential harm to individuals and society. While pranks are traditionally viewed as harmless fun, the authors highlight how many have evolved into acts of humiliation, harassment, and even psychological distress. The study discusses how prank culture thrives on social media, often without concern for the victims' consent or well-being, leading to issues such as public embarrassment, anxiety, and, in extreme cases, self-harm. However, the study has limitations, including a lack of empirical data and reliance on legal and conceptual analysis rather than firsthand accounts. Additionally, while it discusses the legal consequences of harmful pranks, it does not provide concrete data on how laws have been enforced. Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the ethical and legal challenges of prank content and calls for stricter regulations to curb its negative effects. Future research should include empirical data on the psychological impact of pranks and explore effective legal measures to address this growing issue.

The study by Johanis et al (2020) explores cyberbullying trends on social media platforms, focusing on their psychological and societal impact. The authors highlight how the increasing use of social media has facilitated new forms of harassment, leading to depression, low self-esteem, and, in extreme cases, suicidal tendencies among victims. The study emphasizes that cyberbullying is indiscriminate, affecting individuals regardless of their age, gender, or social background. While the study effectively outlines the dangers of online harassment, it has some limitations, including a lack of qualitative insights from victims and an overreliance on statistical data without exploring the emotional depth of cyberbullying experiences. Additionally, while it suggests legal interventions, it does not provide detailed policy recommendations for curbing cyberbullying. Despite these

limitations, the study is relevant to the discussion on pranks as social media content and audience mental health. Prank videos, particularly those that humiliate or distress individuals, share similarities with cyberbullying in their potential to cause psychological harm. Future research should examine how prank culture contributes to online harassment and the long-term emotional effects on victims, reinforcing the need for ethical content creation on digital platforms.

In the study by Vatletsov (2023), the author investigated media pranks as a tool for manipulation, deception, and social atomization, particularly in political discourse. While the study provided valuable insights into how pranks are used to undermine trust in media institutions, there were several limitations to the study. Firstly, the study focused primarily on political pranks, which could limit its applicability to general audience experiences. The author analyzed media hoaxes and staged interactions in political contexts but did not explore their psychological effects on everyday social media users. Secondly, the study lacked empirical data, relying instead on theoretical analysis rather than firsthand accounts or surveys measuring audience reactions to media pranks. Without empirical data, it is difficult to determine the direct impact of pranks on public trust and mental health. Finally, the study did not examine how different types of pranks ranging from harmless jokes to harmful hoaxes—affect audience perceptions differently. Despite these limitations, the study by Vatletsov (2023) provides valuable insights into the role of media pranks in spreading misinformation and influencing public perception. The author used a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from journalism, sociology, and psychology, to analyze the broader consequences of prank culture. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study by Vatletsov (2023) highlights the dangers of media pranks, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. Future research should aim to include empirical data, explore the mental health effects of prank exposure, and investigate how different types of pranks contribute to audience distress and misinformation.

In the study by Haq and Rosyidi (2021), the authors investigated the psychological motivations behind digital prank creation and its potential consequences. While the study provided valuable insights into why prank creators engage in this content, there were

several limitations. Firstly, the study had a small sample size, as only three YouTubers were interviewed, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study relied on qualitative methods without empirical data measuring the psychological impact of pranks on audiences or victims. Without quantitative data, it is difficult to assess the extent to which pranks affect mental health. Finally, the study primarily focused on content creators' motivations, neglecting the perspectives of prank victims and audience reactions, which are crucial to understanding the full impact of prank culture. Despite these limitations, the study by Haq and Rosyidi (2021) provides valuable insights into how prank creators justify their actions, whether for entertainment, financial gain, or creative expression. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study highlights the motivations behind digital pranks, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. Future research should explore the psychological effects on prank victims and audience members, using a broader sample size and empirical methods to assess the mental health impact of prank content.

In the study by Daniel and Ifeduba (2024), the authors investigated the rise of social media pranks and their impact on media credibility and public well-being. While the study provided valuable insights into the dangers of extreme pranking, there were several limitations. Firstly, the study mainly focused on media credibility and security concerns rather than the direct psychological effects on prank victims and audiences. Secondly, it relied on secondary data and case analyses without empirical research, such as surveys or interviews, to measure the mental health impact of prank content. Finally, while the study highlighted the need for regulations to curb harmful pranks, it did not explore the challenges of enforcing such policies on digital platforms. Despite these limitations, the study by Daniel and Ifeduba (2024) provides valuable insights into how prank culture contributes to misinformation, emotional distress, and legal issues. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study effectively highlights the dangers of social media pranks, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. Future research should incorporate empirical data to assess the psychological effects of prank exposure and explore the effectiveness of regulatory measures in mitigating its negative consequences.

In the study by Wang (2024), the author investigated the impact of social media short-form videos on adolescents' psychological and psychosocial well-being. While the study provided valuable insights into both the positive and negative effects of short-form content, there were several limitations. Firstly, the study relied on a small sample of four high school students from Beijing, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Secondly, the study was based on self-reported interviews, which may introduce response bias and subjectivity in assessing emotional regulation, addiction, and social interactions. Finally, while the study acknowledged the risks of excessive social media use, it did not specifically address how prank content within short-form videos affects audience mental health. Despite these limitations, the study by Wang (2024) provides valuable insights into how social media engagement influences adolescents' emotions, stress levels, and social interactions. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study highlights the psychological effects of short-form videos, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. Future research should explore how prank videos contribute to stress, anxiety, and social comparison among young audiences, further linking prank culture to mental health concerns.

In the study by Amonyeze *et al* (2022), the authors investigated the role of social media comedy skits in shaping public perception of COVID-19 in Southern Nigeria. While the study provided valuable insights into how viral comedic content influenced health awareness and misinformation, there were several limitations. Firstly, the study focused primarily on the comedic framing of COVID-19 rather than its psychological effects on audiences, which limits its relevance to broader mental health discussions. Secondly, while it surveyed 900 respondents, it did not incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews to gain deeper insights into how individuals emotionally processed COVID-19-related prank content. Finally, the study emphasized government communication failures but did not explore the ethical responsibility of content creators in spreading misinformation. Despite these limitations, the study by Amonyeze, Okeke, and Agbo (2022) provides valuable insights into how humor influences public discourse and trust in health communication. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration

when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study highlights the power of social media entertainment in shaping public perception, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. Future research should explore how prank content specifically affects audience anxiety, stress, and susceptibility to misinformation, particularly in health crises.

In the study by Ibe, Nzediegwu, and Ishiguzo (2023), the authors investigated how prank content on social media constitutes an unlawful invasion of privacy under Nigeria's legal framework. While the study provided valuable insights into the legal and ethical implications of pranks, there were several limitations. Firstly, the study focused primarily on Nigerian legal provisions, which limits its applicability to broader international discussions on privacy rights and digital content regulation. Secondly, it relied on a qualitative approach without empirical data, such as surveys or psychological assessments, to measure the direct mental health impact on prank victims. Finally, while the study highlighted the legal gaps in regulating pranks, it did not explore how law enforcement agencies can effectively implement privacy protections in a digital space dominated by viral content. Despite these limitations, the study by Ibe, Nzediegwu, and Ishiguzo (2023) provides valuable insights into the dangers of prank culture, particularly its potential to cause distress, reputational damage, and legal consequences for both pranksters and victims. However, the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. In conclusion, while the study effectively outlines the privacy violations caused by prank content, there are several gaps that need to be addressed. Future research should incorporate empirical data on the psychological effects of pranks, explore international best practices for prank regulation, and examine the role of social media platforms in protecting users from invasive content.

The study by Alliu (2024) investigates the psychological and societal impacts of social media pranks in Nigeria, revealing significant mental health consequences for victims and broader implications for national development. While the research provides valuable qualitative insights through interviews with 35 participants and rigorous thematic analysis using NVIVO 14, its small sample size and reliance on purposive/snowball sampling limit generalizability. The absence of quantitative data, control groups, and objective mental

health measures further restricts the ability to conclusively attribute psychological harm solely to prank exposure. Additionally, the study's focus on Nigeria may not account for cultural variations in prank perception and mental health stigma elsewhere. Despite these limitations, the work effectively highlights the need for policy interventions, mental health support systems, and public awareness campaigns. Future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples, mixed-method approaches, and longitudinal tracking to strengthen findings and inform cross-cultural comparisons, ultimately contributing to more robust solutions for mitigating the harms of social media pranks.

However, a recurring limitation in prior studies is lack of consideration for, and there is also a need for deeper analysis of the factors contributing to the observed social media enculturation of prank contents and views mental health. Also, existing research often overlooks the impact of social media pranks on mental health. The methodological approaches adopted by prior studies vary significantly, ranging from interviews, focus group discussion, observation study and desktop research. By addressing these research gaps, this study made a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on how enculturation of social media affects mental health in Nigeria in Nigeria, providing valuable insights for educators, practitioners, and policymakers.

Theoretical Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) formulated by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) states that users of the media are not passive consumers. They actively seek out content that will fulfill their specific needs. The theory can explain why people watch prank videos on social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. UGT looks at the reasons individuals use media, instead of simply how it affects them. This makes it a good way to study how people use prank content.

Prank videos are very popular for many reasons, but the most important of these is escapism and fun. The prank videos offer fun, surprises, and lighthearted fun and remind individuals to set aside their ordinary concerns for a while. The element of surprise in the pranks gives a thrill around them, and people get to have some respite from daily life. Prank videos, besides entertainment, fulfill social interaction needs. People engage with this

content through liking, commenting, and sharing, which contributes to the formation of online community and shared experience. Pranks' viral quality tends to make a lot of people talk about them, reinforcing the social bonds between viewers who engage in these online conversations.

A further major reason why people watch prank videos is shade rude and curiosity, and the desire for excitement. Some pranks involve dangerous situations, surprising responses, or amusing setups, which attract people who look for exciting and new experiences. Some viewers might also feel rude because they take pleasure in the humiliation or embarrassment of others. This pleasure is typically shaped by social hierarchies, whereby viewers might consider themselves superior to the prank target. Yet although pranks are fun, we must also look at the effect on mental health. Seeing mean or embarrassing pranks on a regular basis can make people desensitized to violent behavior and make such actions normal in daily life. Viewing extreme prank videos, especially those scaring or traumatizing others, can increase anxiety and paranoia levels, and individuals may become suspicious in their daily lives. In addition, over focus on prank videos as a source of entertainment might lead to social media addiction. It will reduce real-life social engagement and make people increasingly dependent on internet jokes for enhancement.

Affective Disposition Theory (ADT)

The Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) by Zillmann and Cantor (1976) takes into account how people sympathize with the media characters and entertain them in accordance with their moral judgment of right or wrong. ADT provides that the audience reacts to media based on the extent to which they find themselves in agreement or disagreement with the depicted characters. In prank videos, according to ADT, how people react is based on the way they see the prankster and the pranked.

A critical element of ADT is that people have fun watching the content when they think the prankster's actions are justifiable or funny. Viewers will laugh and have a good time if the prank is innocuous and funny. Viewers will, however, feel uncomfortable or outraged if the prankster's actions seem too unjust or mean. This ethical congruence significantly influences how individuals perceive a prank video, whether they find it amusing or disturbing. Similarly, the reaction of the prank victim also influences the perception of the

audience. If the victim appears to embrace the prank with a smile, the audience is likely to enjoy the material. Conversely, if the victim exhibits genuine distress, audiences—particularly empathetic ones—may experience guilt, second-hand embarrassment, or even anger towards the prankster.

Another element of ADT in the prank content is the revenge theme and tales of justice. The majority of prank videos entail "getting back" at an individual, for instance, exposing cheaters, pranking bullies, or humiliating figures of authority. Individuals who believe in revenge for injustice are satisfied with such pranks since they are in agreement with their view of what is fair. Yet repeated exposure to this kind of content can desensitize people to right and wrong. Exposure to humiliating or aggressive pranks can make someone less bothered about bad behavior. In addition, prank videos have the emotional contagion effect, where people experience strong emotions like joy, unease, or anger—based on what they see. Later, exposure to sad prank videos on a large scale can lead to empathy fatigue, which makes people less compassionate in real life.

In essence, a significant gap in the existing research on social media pranks and viewer mental health is the lack of comprehensive, empirical studies that quantitatively measure the psychological impact of prank content on Nigerian audiences, particularly in terms of anxiety, depression, and desensitization, while also accounting for cultural nuances and individual differences such as pre-existing mental health conditions, age, and gender. While studies like Alliu (2024) and Ayih & Shem (2023) highlight the harms of pranks through qualitative methods, they lack controlled comparisons, longitudinal data, or physiological measures (e.g., cortisol levels) to objectively assess mental health effects, and most focus narrowly on creators or victims rather than the broader audience. Additionally, there is insufficient exploration of how platform algorithms amplify extreme pranks or how cultural values (e.g., respect for elders) moderate viewer reactions, leaving a critical need for mixed-methods research that combines surveys, biometric data, and cross-cultural analysis to inform ethical content policies and mental health intervention.

Methodology

This research employed a quantitative research design with survey as an approach, utilising a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool to investigate the psychological effects, stress-relief potential, and audience perceptions of prank videos

among Nigerian social media users. The study targets Nigeria's active social media population, which stood at approximately 34 million users as of 2022 (Statista, 2022). Given the lack of a precise sampling frame, Taro Yamane's (1967) formula was applied to determine the sample size at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error which resulted in 400 respondents. This sample size is deemed statistically viable for drawing meaningful inferences while accounting for Nigeria's regional diversity. To uphold ethical standards, participants provide informed consent before participation, with assurances of anonymity and data confidentiality. A disclaimer is included to alert respondents to the study's focus on mental health effects, allowing them to opt out if uncomfortable. While the research benefits from a structured approach, limitations such as self-reporting bias and platform-specific exclusions (e.g., non-social media users) are acknowledged. Nevertheless, the methodology ensures a robust examination of prank content's dual role as both entertainment and a potential mental health concern in Nigeria's digital landscape.

Data Analysis, Presentation, and Discussion of findings

RQ1: What are the psychological effects of prank-based social media content on viewers' mental health?

Table 1. Psychological effects of prank videos

Variable	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Total
After watching prank videos, I feel... Amused/Motivated to share	251 (54.4%)	-	-	-	-	-	251 (63.2%)
Indifferent	-	-	132 (34.9%)	-	-	-	132 (33.2%)
Anxious/Emotionally drained	-	-	-	-	14 (10.7%)	-	14 (3.5%)
Total							397 (100.0%)
Exposure to prank videos has affected my daily mood	48 (12.0%)	87 (21.1%)	194 (49.8%)	65 (16.3%)	3 (0.7%)	2.92	397 (100.0%)
I believe prank videos can desensitize viewers to real-life distress	39 (9.8%)	228 (54.4%)	64 (16.1%)	44 (11.1%)	22 (5.5%)	64.2	397 (100.0%)
Some prank videos have caused me to lose trust in social interactions	65 (16.4%)	180 (45.3%)	94 (23.6%)	45 (11.3%)	13 (3.0%)	2.93	397 (100.0%)

Source: Field Work, 2025

SA=Strongly Agree (5); A=Agree (4); N=Neutral (3); D=Disagree (2); SD=Strongly Disagree (1)

Table 1 shows that over half of 252 (63.2%) felt amused or motivated to share, 132(33.2%) were indifferent, and 14(3.5%) reported negative emotions (anxious/emotionally drained). About 194 (36.2%) noted mood impacts (mean=2.92), with 36.2% neutral. A significant 87 (21.1%) believed pranks desensitize viewers to distress (mean=3.43), 194 (49.8%) neutral. Approximately 180 (45.3%) agreed and reported reduced trust (mean=2.93), with 13 (3.0%) disagreeing.

RQ2: To what extent can prank videos serve as a therapeutic tool for psychological stress relief, and what mechanisms?

Table 2. Prank Videos as a Therapeutic Tool

Variable	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Total
I watch prank videos to relieve stress or improve my mood	29 (7.3%)	94 (23.6%)	194 (48.8%)	61 (15.3%)	19 (4.7%)	3.13	397 (100.0%)
Prank videos are an effective way to distract me from negative emotions	33 (8.3%)	57 (14.3%)	248 (62.4%)	35 (8.8%)	24 (6.0%)	3.24	397 (100.0%)
The humor in prank videos helps me feel socially connected to others	19 (4.7%)	60 (15.1%)	269 (67.7%)	32 (8.0%)	17 (4.2%)	3.08	397 (100.0%)
I would recommend prank videos to someone feeling stressed	16 (4.0%)	105 (26.4%)	243 (61.2%)	32 (8.0%)	1 (0.2%)	3.13	397 (100.0%)
Prank videos are as therapeutic as other relaxation methods (e.g., music)	7 (1.7%)	47 (11.8%)	249 (62.7%)	69 (17.3%)	25 (5.5%)	2.72	397 (100.0%)

Source: Field Work, 2025

SA=Strongly Agree (5); A=Agree (4); N=Neutral (3); D=Disagree (2); SD=Strongly Disagree (1)

Table 2 shows that about 94 (23.6%) that they watched social media pranks for stress relief (mean=3.13), with 194 (48.8%) neutral. Similarly, 248 (62.4%) found pranks distracting from negative emotions (mean=3.24). Only 60 (15.1%) felt socially connected (mean=3.08), with 269 (67.7%) neutral. About 47 (11.8%) would recommend pranks for stress relief (mean=3.13), but 249 (62.7%) disagreed on therapeutic equivalence (mean=2.72).

RQ3: Do viewers perceive prank content as entertaining or distressing, and what factors influence their perception?

Table 3 Perceptions of Prank Content

Variable	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Total
Most prank videos I watch are enjoyable	16 (4.0%)	281 (70.7%)	81 (20.4%)	18 (4.5%)	5 (1.2%)	3.54	379 (100.0%)
I find pranks involving public humiliation acceptable	4 (2.7%)	64 (12.1%)	80 (26.8%)	196 (37.6%)	53 (20.8%)	2.38	379 (100.0%)
Pranks that simulate emergencies (e.g., fake injuries) are entertaining	9 (2.7%)	65 (16.8%)	95 (30.2%)	180 (33.6%)	48 (16.8%)	2.55	379 (100.0%)
Cultural values influence whether I find a prank funny or offensive	29 (7.4%)	212 (48.3%)	95 (30.2%)	61 (14.1%)	0 (0.0%)	3.49	379 (100.0%)
Platforms should restrict pranks that could cause psychological harm	40 (14.8%)	275 (50.3%)	54 (22.8%)	24 (9.4%)	4 (2.7%)	3.65	379 (100.0%)

Source: Field Work, 2025

SA=Strongly Agree (5); A=Agree (4); N=Neutral (3); D=Disagree (2); SD=Strongly Disagree (1)

Table 3 reveals that majority 81 (70.7%agree,) found pranks enjoyable (mean=3.54), with 81 (20.4%) neutral. Only 196 (37.6%) disagree) refuse to accept public humiliation pranks (mean=2.38), with 64 (12.1%) agreeing. Similarly, 180 (33.6%) disagree to founding emergency pranks entertaining (mean=2.55), with 65 (16.8%) agreed. Most 212 (48.3%) agreed that pranks brought cultural values influence perceptions (mean=3.49). A strong 275 (50.3%) agree to support that the restricting harmful pranks (mean=3.65).

Table 3 illustrates the perceptions of 397 Nigerian social media users regarding harmful prank videos, specifically those involving public humiliation and simulated emergencies. Only 196 (37.6%) disagree that public humiliation pranks are acceptable, while a substantial 58.4% disagree, indicating strong opposition to content that shames individuals, likely due to Nigeria’s cultural emphasis on respect and communal harmony (Ayih & Shem, 2023). Similarly, 212 (48.3%) find emergency pranks (e.g., fake injuries) entertaining, but 275 (50.3%) agree, reflecting sensitivity to content that mimics real-life distress, particularly in Nigeria’s context of security concerns (Sabrina & Pranesh, 2022).

These findings, aligned with Affective Disposition Theory, suggest that empathy for prank victims drives rejection of harmful content, underscoring the need for ethical content creation and platform regulations (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).

Discussion of Findings

Psychological Effects, Prank videos elicit mixed effects. While 251(54.4%) felt amused, 132 (34.7%) reported negative emotions, aligning with Alliu's (2024) findings on distress potential. The low mood impact (12.0%, mean=2.92) suggests limited effects, with 194(49.8%) neutral, supporting Kramer and Leitao's (2023) mixed findings on humor. The high agreement 228(54.4%, mean=3.43) on desensitization corroborates Sabrina and Pranesh's (2022) concerns about normalizing harmful behaviors, particularly in Nigeria's security context. The 180(45.3%) reporting reduced trust (mean=2.93) reflects Ayih and Shem's (2023) societal harm findings. Affective Disposition Theory (ADT) explains these reactions, as empathy for victims shapes negative responses (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).

Therapeutic Potential, Pranks show moderate therapeutic potential, with 94 (23.6%) using them for stress relief (mean=3.13) and 57 (14.3%) of the respondents finding them distracting (mean=3.24). The 32.8% feeling socially connected (mean=3.08) supports UGT's social motive but is tempered by 40.9% neutral responses. The 105 (26.4%) recommending pranks (mean=3.13) suggests some benefit, but 69 (17.3%) show disagreement on therapeutic equivalence (mean=2.72) contrasts with Freud's (1905) laughter-as-relief theory. Humor and social engagement drive limited effects, but extreme pranks may undermine benefits, aligning with Wang's (2024) findings.

Perceptions, most 281(70.7%, mean=3.54) found pranks enjoyable, supporting UGT's entertainment motive. Opposition to public humiliation 196 (37.6%, mean=2.38) and emergency pranks 180 (33.6%, mean=2.55) reflects Nigeria's cultural emphasis on respect (Ayih & Shem, 2023). The 212(48.3%) agreement on cultural influence (mean=3.49) aligns with McGraw and Warren's (2010) benign violation theory. There is significant support for restricting harmful pranks (mean=3.65) echoes Daniel and Ifeduba's (2024) regulatory calls. ADT explains rejection of harmful pranks, as empathy triggers discomfort.

Therefore, the contrast between high enjoyment and rejection of harmful pranks, against humiliation, while significant number of the respondents against emergencies. This suggests viewers prefer lighthearted pranks but are sensitive to cultural norms of respect,

particularly in Nigeria's insecurity context.

In summary, the study surveyed 397 Nigerian social media users, primarily young, educated students. Prank videos amuse but distress with noting desensitization risks and reporting reduced trust. Therapeutically, uses of there are agreement on pranks for stress relief, but only few respondents view them as equivalent to other methods. Most of the respondents find pranks enjoyable, but harmful types (humiliation, emergencies) are rejected because of the influenced by cultural values. Strong support of social media pranks exists among the respondents to restricting harmful pranks.

Collectively, this study illuminates the complex role of prank videos in Nigeria's social media landscape, revealing their dual capacity to entertain and harm. Respondents who find pranks amusing or motivating underscore their appeal as a vibrant genre, particularly among youth, aligning with UGT's entertainment motive (Katz et al., 1973). However, considerable number of respondents claimed that they are experiencing anxiety or emotional distress highlights significant mental health risks, as noted by Alliu (2024). Respondents agreeing that pranks desensitize viewers to real-life distress suggest a troubling normalization of harmful behaviors, especially in Nigeria's context of heightened security concerns, where simulated emergencies may evoke genuine fear (Sabrina & Pranesh, 2022). The respondents agreed that reporting reduced trust in social interactions further signals broader societal impacts, eroding interpersonal confidence in a culture that values communal harmony (Ayih & Shem, 2023).

Therapeutically, prank videos offer moderate benefits, with 36.9% using them for stress relief and 40.2% finding them distracting, driven by humor and social connection. Yet, their limited equivalence to traditional relaxation methods like music as indicates cultural or content-specific constraints, challenging Freud's (1905) laughter-as-relief concept. The significant numbers of respondents are enjoying pranks that reflect a cultural affinity for humor, but there is less significant to harmful types of social media pranks are humiliating, and average number of the respondents are against emergencies) and a little bit above the average of the respondents numbers are in support there should be high level for regulation highlight ethical boundaries shaped by respect and empathy, and these are consistent with McGraw and Warren's (2010) benign violation theory and Daniel and Ifeduba's (2024) regulatory advocacy.

Limitations include that the cross-sectional design restricts insights into long-term effects, and self-reported data may introduce response bias. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track cumulative impacts, diversify samples to include older and rural populations, and analyze specific prank types (e.g., harmless vs. extreme) to refine findings. Qualitative studies could explore viewers' emotional experiences in depth, complementing this quantitative analysis.

The findings underscore the urgent need for ethical content creation and platform regulations to mitigate psychological harms while preserving pranks' entertainment value. By addressing these issues, Nigeria can foster a safer digital environment, contributing to global efforts to balance social media's benefits and risks in the digital age.

The study recommended that social media platforms should implement robust content moderation policies to restrict pranks involving public humiliation or simulated emergencies, as evidenced by the significant support for regulation. Such measures would protect viewers from psychological harm, particularly in Nigeria's culturally sensitive context, where respect is paramount. Platforms could employ AI-driven filters to flag harmful content, ensuring compliance while fostering a safer digital environment. Educating the public on the potential mental health impacts of prank videos is essential and reporting distress. Government agencies, NGOs, and platforms should collaborate on awareness campaigns targeting Nigeria's youth-heavy social media audience. These campaigns could use relatable messaging to encourage critical consumption, addressing the limited mental health discourse in Nigeria and empowering viewers to recognize harmful content.

Training content creators on Nigeria's cultural values, such as respect for elders and communal harmony, is critical to note that the cultural influence on prank perceptions. Platforms could offer workshops or certification programs, incentivizing creators to produce ethical, lighthearted pranks. This would align content with local norms, reducing the risk of offense or distress while maintaining entertainment value.

Providing mental health resources for viewers affected by distressing pranks is necessary and experiencing may likely to reduce social trust. Platforms should integrate links to counseling services or helplines within their interfaces, particularly for Nigerian users facing prank-induced anxiety. Partnerships with local mental health organizations could

enhance accessibility, addressing the gap in support services.

Further research should explore the long-term effects of prank videos, as current findings are cross-sectional (Alliu, 2024). Longitudinal studies, diverse samples, and analyses of specific prank types (e.g., harmless vs. extreme) would deepen understanding, informing policies and creator practices in Nigeria's evolving digital landscape.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study provides empirical evidence on prank videos' psychological and therapeutic effects in Nigeria, addressing gaps noted by Ayih and Shem (2023). It quantifies mixed impacts—amusement versus distress—and highlights cultural influences, enriching UGT and ADT applications. The opposition to harmful pranks and support for regulation offer actionable insights for policy and content creation, contributing to global discussions on social media's mental health implications.

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