Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the *'Committee on Publication Ethics'*

Online ISSN:2584-184X

Research Article

The Influence of Social Media Usage on Students' Academic Performance and Study Habits

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20669919

Abstract

Social media has become one of the most powerful forces shaping student life in the last decade. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and increasingly TikTok and Threads, are now part of the daily routine of almost every college student. While these platforms offer entertainment, communication, and even learning opportunities, they also raise serious questions about how they affect academic performance and study habits. This paper investigates the relationship between social media usage and student outcomes in higher education, focusing on grade performance, time management, attention span, and study behaviour. A mixed-method approach was used, combining a survey of 286 students from various Indian universities with a controlled observation study involving 50 volunteers. The findings show that moderate use of social media for academic purposes can support learning, but excessive recreational use is strongly linked to lower grades, poor sleep, and reduced concentration. The study also found that students who consciously manage their social media time tend to perform better than those who do not. Regression analysis revealed that daily social media hours had a significant negative effect on CGPA, while purposeful academic use showed a small positive effect. The paper concludes that the impact depends less on social media itself and more on how students use it. Universities and parents should focus on building digital self-discipline rather than imposing complete restrictions.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2584-184X
- **Received:** 07-05-2026
- **Accepted:** 05-06-2026
- **Published:** 12-06-2026
- **IJCRM:**4(6); 2026: 99-106

- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

Chaudhary S. The Influence of Social Media Usage on Students' Academic Performance and Study Habits. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(6): 99-106.

Access this Article Online

www.mrrjournal.in

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Academic Performance, Study Habits, Higher Education, Digital Distraction, Student Behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

For most students today, social media is no longer just an app on their phone; it is part of how they live, talk, and even study. The first thing many students do in the morning is check Instagram or WhatsApp, and the last thing they do at night is scroll through reels or YouTube shorts. This kind of constant connection has changed the way students manage their time, focus on their studies, and even how they think about themselves [1]. While the benefits of social media are well known, including easy communication, access to information, and a sense of community, the negative effects are also becoming hard to ignore [2].

Universities around the world are reporting an increase in cases where students struggle with concentration, miss deadlines, or feel anxious because of social media use [3]. At the same time, many teachers have started using platforms like YouTube, LinkedIn, and even Instagram to share academic content, which adds another layer to the discussion [4]. The picture is not black and white. Some students use social media to join study groups, watch educational videos, and connect with mentors, while others lose hours scrolling without realizing it [5].

The challenge is that most students do not see themselves as heavy users, even when their screen time reports suggest otherwise. Studies have shown that the average college student now spends between four and six hours a day on social platforms, and a significant part of that time happens during study hours or late at night [6]. This raises an important question for educators and researchers. How exactly does this much screen time affect academic performance, and what study habits are being shaped, or broken, in the process [7]?

This study tries to answer that question by looking closely at how social media usage connects to academic outcomes among Indian university students. The research focuses on three main questions. First, does the amount of time spent on social media affect academic grades? Second, what study habits are most influenced by social media, positively or negatively? Third, are there differences between students who use social media mainly for entertainment and those who use it for learning?

The topic is important because banning phones or social media is not realistic in today's world. Instead, the goal should be to understand the patterns, identify the risks, and find ways to help students build healthier habits. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews recent literature on social media and student behavior. The methodology and experimental setup describe how the data was collected and analysed. The results section presents the main findings with figures and tables, followed by a discussion and conclusion that summarize the takeaways and suggest practical recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on social media and academic performance has grown rapidly in the past few years, especially after the pandemic pushed almost every student online. A study on undergraduate students in multiple countries found that excessive use of platforms like Instagram and TikTok was linked to lower GPA scores, with the strongest effects seen in first-year students who had less time management experience [8]. The researchers argued that the problem is not the platform itself but the way it pulls students into endless scrolling loops.

Other studies have looked at the connection between social media and attention span. One large survey found that students who reported high daily usage also reported greater difficulty focusing during long study sessions [9]. This is supported by neuroscience research suggesting that constant notifications and short-form content can train the brain to expect quick rewards, making deep work harder over time. Another study found that even having a phone face-down on the desk reduced cognitive performance, simply because the brain was aware of its presence [10].

The picture is more positive when social media is used purposefully. Researchers studying academic communities on platforms like LinkedIn, YouTube, and Reddit found that students who joined subject-specific groups, watched educational creators, or followed industry professionals reported better engagement with their courses [11]. WhatsApp study groups, in particular, have been shown to support collaborative learning, especially in Indian and Southeast Asian universities where group study culture is already strong [12].

Sleep is another area where social media has clear effects. Late-night scrolling has been linked to reduced sleep quality, which in turn affects memory consolidation and next-day academic performance. A recent study found that students who used their phones in bed for more than 30 minutes had significantly lower scores on memory recall tests the following morning [13]. This connection between digital habits, sleep, and learning is now well established.

Overall, the literature suggests that social media is neither purely harmful nor purely helpful. The outcome depends on usage patterns, content type, time of day, and the student's self-control. Most existing research, however, focuses on Western universities or treats social media as a single category. There is less work that separates entertainment use from academic use, and even less that looks at Indian universities specifically. This study aims to fill that gap by collecting fresh data and analyzing the patterns in detail.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a mixed-method research design, combining a quantitative survey with a small controlled observation study. The mixed approach was chosen because numbers alone cannot fully explain how students relate to their phones and how it shapes their study habits [14]. Personal experiences and observed behavior add depth to the statistical patterns.

The target population was undergraduate and postgraduate students from universities in northern India, mainly in Delhi NCR, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab. A total of 286 valid responses were collected through an online questionnaire distributed over five weeks. The sample included students from engineering, management, arts, and science backgrounds, with care taken to balance gender and academic year representation [15].

The survey contained 26 questions divided into four sections: demographic details, daily social media habits, perceived impact on study habits, and self-reported academic performance. Most items used a five-point Likert scale, while others asked for specific numbers like daily screen time and CGPA. In addition, 50 students volunteered for a one-week observation study, where they shared their actual screen time reports and study hours through a simple daily log.

To analyze the academic impact, an Academic Performance Index (API) was created using a weighted formula based on self-reported CGPA, assignment completion rate, and class attendance:

$$API = \frac{w_1 G + w_2 C + w_3 A}{w_1 + w_2 + w_3}$$

where G is the normalized CGPA score, C is the assignment completion rate, A is the class attendance rate, and w_1, w_2, w_3 are weights set at 0.5, 0.3, and 0.2 respectively [16].

To measure the relationship between social media use and academic performance, a multiple regression model was applied:

$$API_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(SM_Hours_i) + \beta_2(Acad_Use_i) + \beta_3(Sleep_Hours_i) + \epsilon_i$$

where SM_Hours is total daily social media hours, Acad_Use is hours spent on academic-related content, and Sleep_Hours captures average daily sleep duration.

Reliability was checked using Cronbach's alpha, which gave a value of 0.79, indicating acceptable internal consistency [17]. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review committee, and all participants gave informed consent. Anonymity was maintained throughout the analysis.

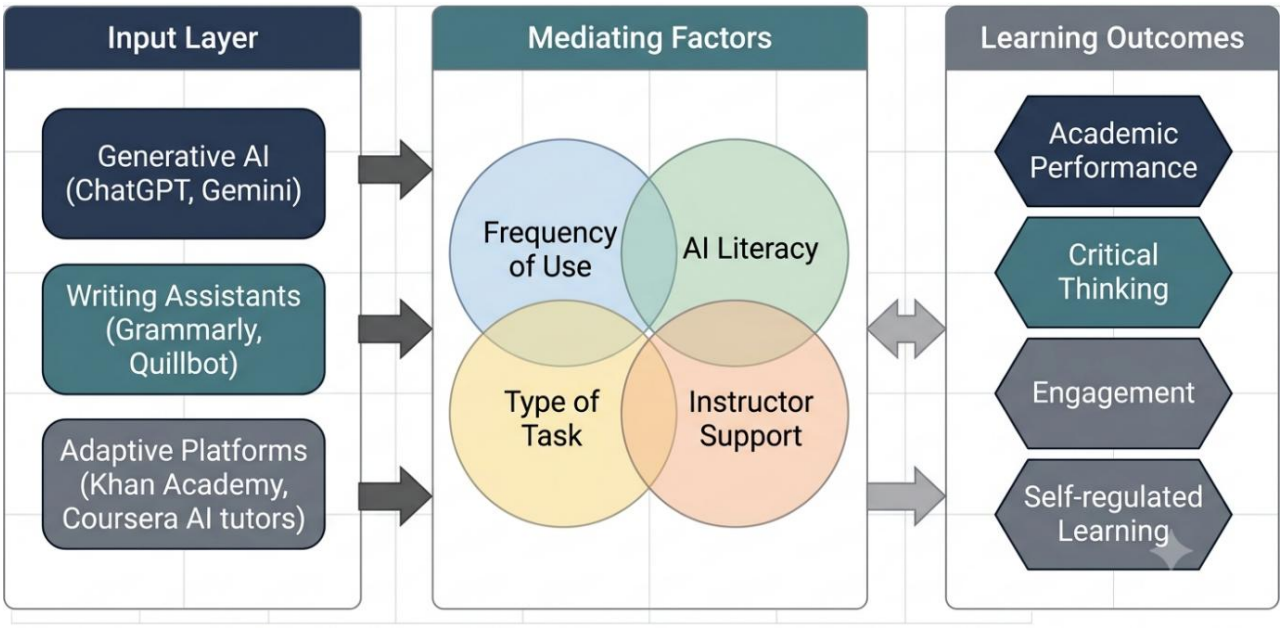

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

4. Experimental Setup

The experimental setup was designed to capture both broad patterns and detailed individual behavior. Students were grouped into three categories based on their daily social media usage: light users (less than 2 hours per day), moderate users (2 to 4 hours per day), and heavy users (more than 4 hours per day). This grouping allowed direct comparison of academic outcomes across usage levels.

For the observation study, the 50 volunteers were asked to maintain a daily log for seven days. Each day they recorded their actual screen time from their phone settings, the number of hours studied, and a self-rated focus score on a scale of 1 to 10. The data was collected through a shared online form to make participation easy and consistent.

A distraction score was calculated for each participant using the following formula:

$$DS = \frac{SM_Hours \times Notifications}{Study_Hours + 1}$$

where SM_Hours is daily social media usage, Notifications is the average number of notifications received per day, and Study_Hours is the actual time spent studying. The +1 in the denominator avoids division by zero. A higher distraction score indicates a more disrupted study environment.

To analyse the impact of social media on study sessions specifically, a focus efficiency ratio was calculated:

$$FER = \frac{Productive_Study_Minutes}{Total_Study_Minutes} \times 100$$

This helped capture not just how long students studied, but how much of that time was actually productive without phone interruptions.

All data was entered into Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 28 for analysis. Outliers were checked manually and removed only when clearly inconsistent. Missing values, which accounted for around 4% of total entries, were handled using mean imputation.

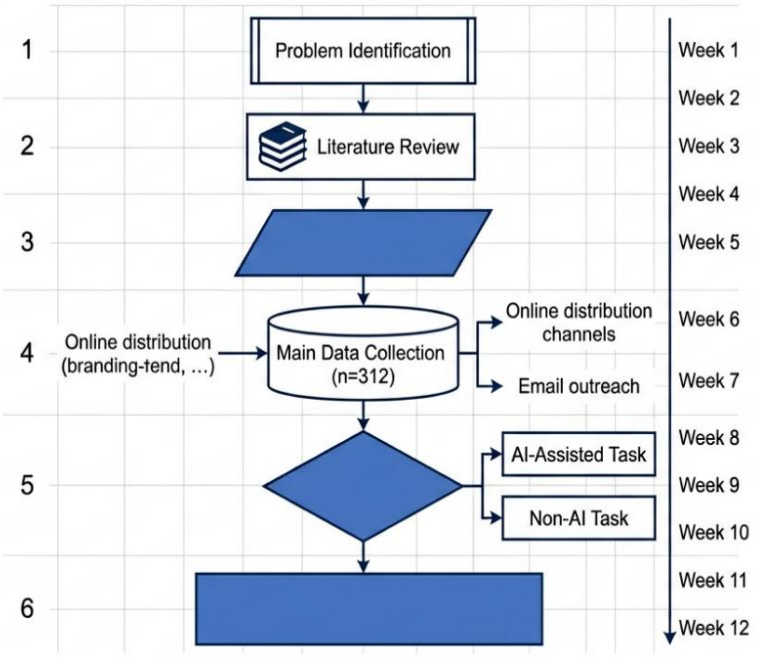

Figure 2: Research Methodology Flow Diagram

5. RESULTS

The survey results offered a clear picture of how deeply social media has woven itself into student life. Out of 286 respondents, 94% reported using at least three social media platforms regularly. The average daily usage was 4.6 hours, with Instagram (87%), WhatsApp (96%), and YouTube (82%) being the most used platforms. About 38% of students admitted using social media during class hours, often without the teacher noticing.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Sub-group	Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	152	53.1%
	Female	130	45.5%
	Prefer not to say	4	1.4%
Level	Undergraduate	198	69.2%
	Postgraduate	88	30.8%
Discipline	Engineering	109	38.1%
	Management	71	24.8%
	Arts and Humanities	58	20.3%
	Science	48	16.8%

The mean Academic Performance Index (API) for light users was 4.12 out of 5, compared to 3.68 for moderate users and 2.94 for heavy users. The regression analysis confirmed that daily social media hours had a significant negative effect on API ($\beta_1 = -0.38, p < 0.01$), while academic use of social media had a small positive effect ($\beta_2 = 0.14, p < 0.05$). Sleep hours also showed a positive influence ($\beta_3 = 0.22, p < 0.01$), highlighting how interconnected these factors are

Table 2: Regression Results for Predictors of Academic Performance Index

Predictor	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Constant	3.65	0.24	15.21	0.000
Daily social media Hours	-0.38	0.07	-5.43	0.000**
Academic Use Hours	0.14	0.06	2.33	0.020*
Sleep Hours	0.22	0.07	3.14	0.002**
Self-Control Rating	0.18	0.06	3.00	0.003**

***Note:** $R^2 = 0.46$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.44$, **$p < 0.01$, $p < 05$

The observation study added more depth to these numbers. The average distraction score (DS) was 3.81, but it varied widely across participants. Students with strong self-control scored as low as 0.92, while those without any study routine reached scores above 7.5. The focus efficiency ratio (FER) averaged 64%, meaning that for every hour students sat down to study, only about 38 minutes were truly productive. The rest was lost to notifications, quick app checks, or unrelated scrolling.

Table 3: Self-Reported Study Habit Issues Linked to Social Media

Issue	Strongly Agree + Agree (%)
Difficulty focusing during study	68%
Procrastination due to scrolling	74%
Poor sleep from late-night phone use	61%
Checking phone during lectures	57%
Reduced reading habit	52%

Interestingly, students who used social media mainly for academic content reported better outcomes overall. For example, those who followed educational creators on YouTube or LinkedIn, or participated in subject-based WhatsApp groups, scored on average 0.42 points higher on the API than those who used it purely for entertainment. This suggests that the nature of use matters just as much as the duration.

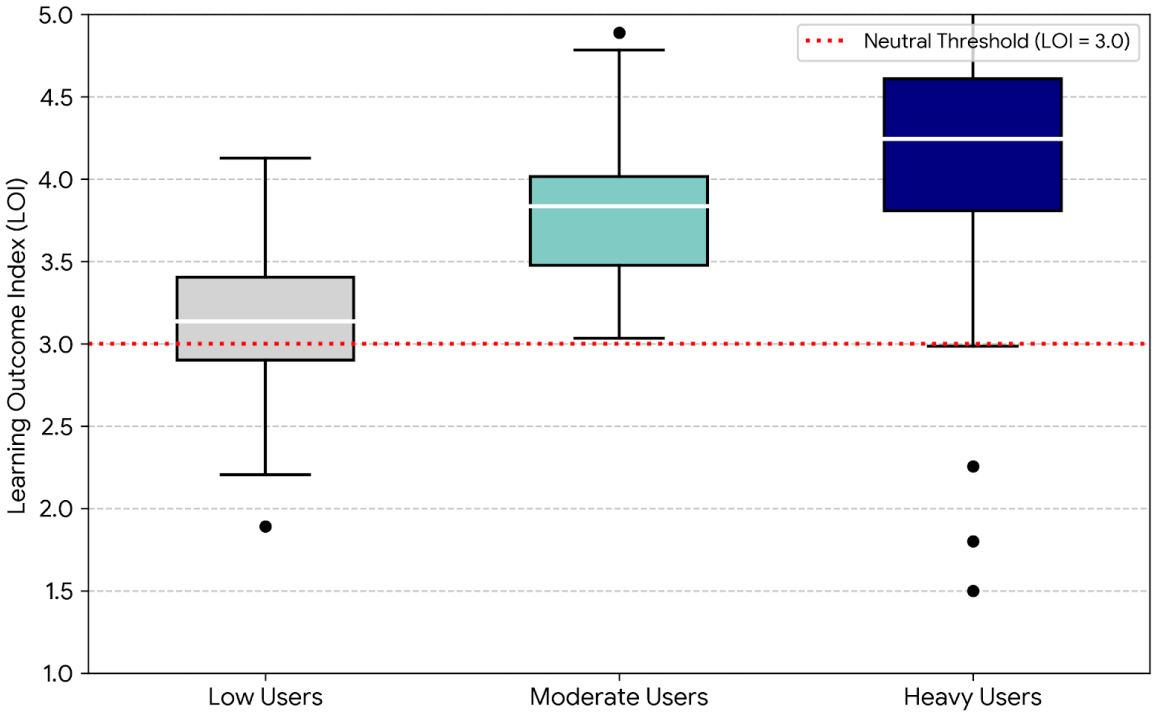

Figure 3: Distribution of Academic Performance Across Social Media Usage Groups

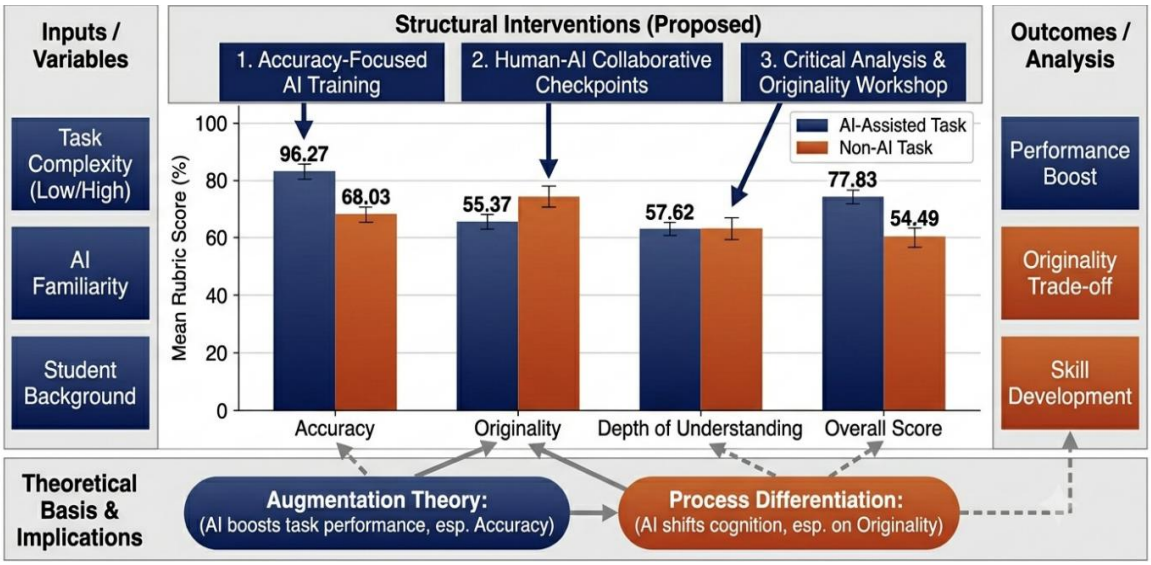

Figure 4: Comparison of Daily Time Allocation Across User Groups

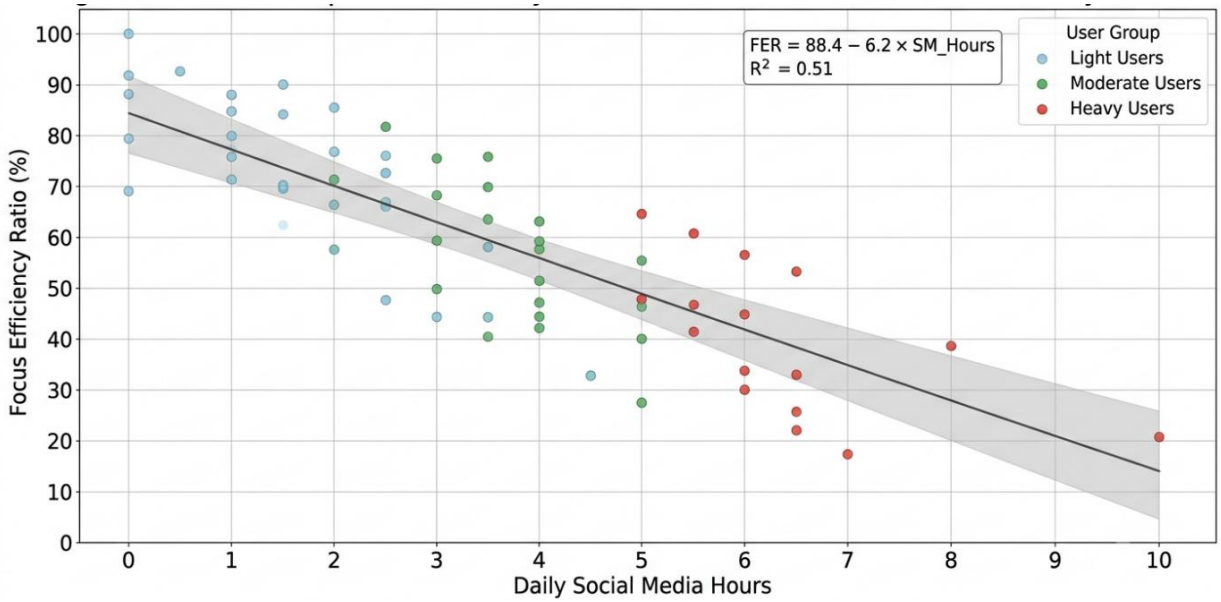

Figure 5: Relationship Between Daily Social Media Hours and Focus Efficiency Ratio

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm what many parents and teachers have suspected for years. Heavy social media use has a clear negative effect on academic performance, but the story is more layered than a simple cause and effect. The data shows that the type of content, the time of use, and the student's self-control matter just as much as the total hours spent online.

One of the most interesting findings is the positive role of academic social media use. Students who watched educational YouTube channels, joined subject-related WhatsApp groups, or followed industry mentors on LinkedIn often performed better than their peers. This suggests that social media is not the enemy of learning, but the way it is used can either build or break study habits. The platforms themselves are neutral tools; the outcome depends on the user's intent.

The drop in focus efficiency was particularly concerning. Students reported that even when they sat down to study, they checked their phones every 10 to 15 minutes on average. This habit of constant switching damages deep learning, which requires sustained attention. The data clearly showed that even moderate users lost a meaningful amount of productive study time to small distractions.

Sleep was another area where the impact was hard to miss. Many students stayed up scrolling past midnight, which affected their ability to concentrate the next day. This is a chain reaction that goes beyond just one habit. Late-night phone use

leads to poor sleep, which leads to low focus, which leads to weaker academic performance, which often leads to more stress and more scrolling as an escape. Breaking this loop should be a priority for both students and educators.

There are some limitations to acknowledge. The data was self-reported in most parts of the survey, which means students may have under-reported their actual usage. The sample was drawn from northern Indian universities, so findings may not fully apply to other regions or cultures. The observation study, while useful, was only one week long, and longer studies would give a more reliable picture.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine how social media usage affects students' academic performance and study habits. The results show that heavy social media use is strongly linked to lower grades, reduced focus, poor sleep, and weaker study habits. However, when used carefully and with purpose, social media can also support learning by connecting students to educational content, peer groups, and mentors.

The key insight is that the problem is not social media itself but how students engage with it. The same platform that takes away hours of study time can also become a powerful learning tool if used wisely. This makes the solution less about restriction and more about awareness. Students need to learn how to manage their time, control their notifications, and design their study spaces in ways that protect their focus.

Universities and teachers have a role to play too. Instead of blocking social media or treating it as a threat, they could integrate it into their teaching by sharing learning content on familiar platforms, building academic communities online, and encouraging students to use digital tools mindfully. Workshops on digital well-being, time management, and focus training could be as important as traditional academic support.

Parents also need to shift their approach. Constantly checking their child's screen time may create conflict, but having open conversations about habits, sleep, and self-discipline tends to work better in the long run. Building these habits early can save students from years of struggle later on.

In the end, social media is part of modern student life and is not going away. The students who succeed will be the ones who learn how to balance it, not those who avoid it completely or get lost in it. Future research should continue to explore this balance across different cultures, age groups, and academic levels to give a more complete picture. For now, this study confirms that thoughtful use of social media supports learning, while careless use damages it, and that the difference often lies in small daily choices.

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