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Social Media Use and Perceived Academic Outcomes of Female University Students

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Abstract

This study examined the association between social media use among female university students and perceived academic outcomes. Quantitative data were collected from 150 female students at the University of Sargodha using a cross-sectional design and a structured 29-item questionnaire covering social media use, perceived academic advantages, distraction-related behaviour, and academic outcomes. The scale showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .885). Descriptive analysis showed that most respondents were young (78.7%, aged 18-24), urban (78.0%), and undergraduate (70.7%), with over half (52.0%) using social media for five or more hours daily, primarily Instagram (54.0%). Correlational analysis revealed a positive association between perceived academic help from social media and increased interest in the field of study (composite r = .397, p < .001), and between lost study time due to social media and perceived academic loss (composite r = .164, p = .045). However, some weaker item-level associations were not significant given the sample size. Chi-square tests showed no significant relationship between age or education level and attention-related difficulties. A simple linear regression indicated no statistically significant relationship between time spent on social media and the composite academic-impact score (R-squared = .001, p = .720). Overall, the findings tentatively suggest that how and why female university students use social media may be more closely associated with perceived academic outcomes than the amount of time spent on it; as the study is cross-sectional and perception-based, causal conclusions cannot be drawn.

Keywords: Social Media; Perceived Academic Outcomes; Female Students; Subject Interest; Distraction

1. Introduction

Social media is now used by approximately five billion people, representing around 62% of the world's population (Kemp, 2024). The use of social media has become an essential part of university students' lives, and more recently, it has become a crucial part of their learning process (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ansari & Khan, 2020). University students are among the most active groups of social media users, who utilize it for socializing, research, collaboration, and access to educational material (Junco, 2012). Social media can facilitate collaboration among students and provide them access to a vast amount of information, but it can also be a distraction from the tasks at hand and has been associated with lower student GPA, poorer time management, and less effective studying (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Junco, 2012).

Social media may offer female students in Pakistan opportunities to interact, learn, and engage in academic pursuits (Abbas et al., 2019), while cultural and societal norms may also shape how they use their time (Safdar & Khan, 2020). However, these cultural influences were not directly measured in the present study and are therefore treated only tentatively in the Discussion.

Though there is an increasing amount of research conducted across the globe that correlates the use of social media with students' interpersonal relationships and academic performance among students at universities (Chandrasena & Ilankoon, 2022), relatively less research has been conducted on female students in Pakistan and the difference between using social media academically and non-academically. This study addresses this gap by exploring social media usage by female students and its perceived relationship with academic outcomes, subject interest, and distraction-related experiences among female students.

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of the present study were as follows:

1. To find out why and how female university students use social media.
2. To find out the perceived impact of the use of social media by female university students on their educational outcomes.
3. To examine the associations between perceived academic assistance from social media and female university students' subject interest.
4. To investigate the relationships between social media use, perceived academic difficulties, and reported time-management experiences among female university students.

3. Literature Review

There are two major theoretical views on the research of social media and educational outcomes. The displacement hypothesis states that social media time-spending habits would be directly replaced by the time spent on academic tasks, suggesting a direct, negative dose-response relationship between hours spent online and academic performance (Tokunaga, 2016). In contrast, the Uses and Gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) is based on the idea that duration of media use does not determine its consequences; rather, it is the reasons for using the media and how the media is used that influence the consequences.

The results of the empirical studies regarding social media and academic performance are still inconclusive. Some studies suggest that social networking can positively contribute to academic engagement when they are used appropriately (Bharali, 2025), and others indicate that high levels of non-academic use and social media multitasking are linked to distraction, poor time management, and decreased academic focus (Essien, 2025; Junco, 2012). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) also posits that when students watch their peers' carefully curated academic and social achievements on image- and achievement-oriented platforms like Instagram, it can lower their confidence in their own abilities. Similarly, their fear of missing out (FoMO) from constantly checking social media has been associated with increased anxiety and difficulties that make it hard for them to stop using social media, even when it interferes with

other activities (Przybylski et al., 2013; Alutaybi et al., 2020). Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) also suggests that frequent switching between social media and study tasks makes it harder for students to refocus and to process academic material efficiently, which may in turn impair their academic performance.

Researchers are divided on the influence of social networking sites (SNS) on educational outcomes, with some arguing that the duration of use is likely to be the most critical factor while others suggest that the intent, timing, and psychological factors associated with SNS use (such as FoMO, social comparison, checking behaviour) are more significant than actual use time. Further complexity comes from gender and cultural context, which has been rarely explored in Pakistan, and motivates the current research.

Recent syntheses have been able to distinguish between general platform use and problematic engagement. Paterna et al. (2024) found a small negative correlation between problematic smartphone use and academic achievement (r = −.11) in a meta-analysis of 29 studies (33 effect sizes, N = 48,490), and a stronger correlation in samples of elementary and middle school students. In the same way, Salari et al. (2025) combined the studies of university students and discovered a small negative connection between social networking addiction (SNA) and academic performance (r = −.172, 95% CI [−.320, −.016]). Both syntheses are related to problematic or addictive patterns of use instead of hours spent online. Systematic reviews of university or college samples also indicate such nuances: Putra et al. (2024) found that social media's impact on achievement is complex, with higher intensity social media use negatively correlated with concentration, and purposeful, directed use positively correlated with interest and engagement; and Alshuwaiyer et al. (2026) reviewed 10 studies of U.S. college students and concluded that four indicated that there was no academic harm when social media was used moderately, six that social media use had a negative correlation to achievement, and all that self-control is a key component of achievement. The same question was raised by other reviews in the MENA region (Zerrouk et al., 2026) and in higher education in general (Mihret & Joshi, 2024), while Amjad et al. (2024) explored the role of social media and mobile learning and ChatGPT in relation to academic achievement.

Another distinction between measurements, which is crucial to the present study, is highlighted in this literature. Duration of use (hours/day) is not synonymous with problematic or addictive use, digital multitasking during study, or poor self-regulation of learning, and perceived academic outcomes are not synonymous with measures of achievement (GPA). Meta-analytic effects above are small and are related to problematic use, and the review evidence suggests self-control and purpose of use and time. Thus, a single self-reported time-spent item does not measure these constructs, and a null association between time and perceived outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence that social media is academically harmless. This restriction is further discussed in the Discussion.

There is limited evidence in Pakistan, and it is not directly comparable between studies. Sadia et al. (2025) conducted a cross-sectional study among 122 students of the University of Sargodha by convenience sampling to test the association between academic performance and the use of social media. The results indicated a significant association between the two (χ^2 = 234.622, df = 12, p = .001), and it was concluded that heavier use is associated with less concentration and less achievement. This study differs in population (150 female students only), in instrument and in outcome (a 29-item scale that measures perceived academic outcomes), and in analysis (correlation and linear regression of a composite perceived-impact score on time spent). Since the two studies are based on convenience samples from the same university, the two sets of findings should be considered complementary to each other, rather than contradictory or directly equivalent, because a chi-square test indicates association, but not the direction or the size of a linear effect.

Drawing on these competing perspectives, this study asks whether the amount of time spent on social media or the purpose of its use is more closely related to perceived academic outcomes.

4. Research Design and Population

The present research employed a quantitative methodology with a cross-sectional research design. The target population consisted of enrolled female undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University of Sargodha. Female students were chosen because their distinct cultural and educational backgrounds may shape their patterns of social media use in Pakistan.

The sample comprised 150 female university students, selected through convenience and quota sampling. Convenience sampling was used because of time and financial constraints, and respondents' availability and willingness to participate. Quota sampling was applied because the students came from both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and postgraduate students were fewer in number than undergraduate students. The quota therefore ensured that both levels of study were represented in the sample (undergraduate = 106; postgraduate = 44).

Data were collected over a period of two weeks. The questionnaire was prepared as an online form in Google Forms, and the link was sent to teachers from different departments, who were asked to share it with their students. Participation was only open to full-time female students of the university who used social media. All 150 students who received the questionnaire completed and submitted their responses, giving a response rate of 100%. Informed consent was obtained, responses were anonymous, and participation was voluntary throughout.

5. Instrument and Data Collection

A structured and self-administered questionnaire was prepared for the study, which included a demographic section (Age, Educational Level, Residence) and 29 five-point Likert items (Very Much to Never). The questions were directed at the general patterns of using social media, academic uses of social media, perceived educational help from educational content, checking behaviour while studying, loss of study time, FoMO, perceived academic loss, difficulty refocusing, attention-related consequences, loss of confidence from social comparison, and social media as a rewarding alternative to academic work.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.885	29

The internal consistency of the tool and scale used in it was checked by applying Cronbach's alpha, which was .885 for the 29-item scale, exceeding the .70 benchmark recommended for social-science research (Nunnally, 1978; George & Mallery, 2003). This suggested that the items measured the construct of social media use and its perceived academic consequences consistently.

6. Data Analysis and Results

The analysis of data was carried out using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, chi-square tests of independence, and simple linear regression.

6.1 Demographic Profile

The demographic information of the sample is summarized in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. Demographic Information of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	18-24 years	118	78.7
	25 years and above	32	21.3
Education	Undergraduate	106	70.7
	Post-graduate	44	29.3
Residence	Urban	117	78.0
	Rural	33	22.0

The sample mainly comprised young, urban, and undergraduate female university students, reflecting the characteristics of the target population.

6.2 Time Spent on Social Media and Platform Use

Table 6.2.1. Average Time Spent on Social Media in a Single Day

Time Spent	n	%
Less than 1 hour	4	2.7
1-2 hours	17	11.3
3-4 hours	51	34.0

5-6 hours	37	24.7
More than 6 hours	41	27.3

Table 6.2.1 indicates that female university students are highly engaged with social media, with over half (52.0%, n = 78) reporting that they spend 5 or more hours daily on social media.

Table 6.2.2. Most Used Social Media Platform

Platform	n	%
Instagram	81	54.0
WhatsApp	32	21.3
TikTok	17	11.3
Other (YouTube, Snapchat, X, Facebook)	20	13.3

Table 6.2.2 shows that Instagram was the most used platform (54.0%). As an image- and achievement-oriented platform, Instagram may be relevant to social comparison processes, although the present data do not test this directly.

6.3 Purpose and Academic Uses of Social Media

Table 6.3. Usefulness of Social Media for Educational Purposes

Academic Activity	n	%
Clarifying concepts	116	77.3
Assignments collaboration	98	65.3
Sharing academic resources	103	68.7
Group study	72	48.0

The most strongly endorsed purpose of social media use was entertainment (reported in the text only; it is not tabulated), as 43.3% (n = 65) of respondents indicated that they were "Very Much" engaged in this activity. However, academic and socializing purposes had a wider range of responses. Table 6.3 displays the percentage of respondents who indicated that they "Very Much" or "Much" agreed with specific activities, for each academic activity. Clarifying concepts was the most widely endorsed academic use, while group study was the least endorsed.

6.4 Correlational Findings

Table 6.4.1. Correlations between Perceived Academic Help and Increased Subject Interest

Item	r	p
Class discussions	.269	<.001
Writing assignments	.350	<.001
Making presentations	.410	<.001
Preparing quizzes/tests	.373	<.001
Preparing for examinations	.230	.005
Executing practical projects	.331	<.001
Composite score	.397	<.001

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the association between the perceived academic assistance from the educational content presented on social media and interest in the academic field of study. As indicated in Table 6.4.1, all six items and the composite score were significantly and positively related to the subject interest. The correlations were small to moderate in magnitude (r = .23 to .41; Cohen, 1988), so they should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 6.4.2. Correlations between Lost Study Time and Perceived Academic Loss

Item	r	p
Forgetting academic deadlines	.140	.087
Poor understanding	.091	.270
Low critical thinking	.217	.008
Getting low scores	.130	.114
Uninterested practical participation	.143	.080
Composite score	.164	.045

The relationship between social media distraction of study time and five aspects of perceived academic loss was also explored. As noted above, four of the weaker item-level correlations (forgetting academic deadlines, poor understanding, getting low scores, and uninterested practical participation) were not statistically significant at the conventional levels at this sample size, as shown in Table 6.4.2. Only low critical thinking and the composite score (r = .164) reached significance, and the composite correlation was small.

6.5 Demographic Comparisons

Table 6.5. Chi-Square Test for Demographic Comparisons

Comparison	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V
Age × Difficulty refocusing	6.89	4	.142	.214
Education × Mentally	3.38	4	.496	.150

Comparison	χ^2	df	p	Cramer's V
overloaded				
Education × Inability to solve academic problems	8.03	4	.090	.231

A series of chi-square tests of independence were used to test whether age or education level was related to attention-related difficulties. None of these associations were statistically significant, and all effect sizes (Cramer's V) were small to moderate, suggesting that difficulty focusing after social media use and attention-related consequences were widespread across age and education subgroups and not specific to any one group. Given the sample size and the number of response categories, some expected cell frequencies may have been low, so these results should be interpreted cautiously. In this sample, 59.3% of respondents reported feeling at least somewhat less confident about their own abilities after seeing others' success on social media, suggesting that exposure to social comparison was common.

6.6 Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression was used to determine if the time spent on social media was predictive of a composite academic-impact score (sum of items related to distraction, difficulty refocusing, consequences of attention, loss of confidence, and social media as an alternative to academic work). The model was not statistically significant, as shown in Table 6.6.

Table 6.6. Regression of Academic Impact on Time Spent on Social Media

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	2.626	.220	—	11.94	<.001
Time spent on social media	.021	.058	.030	0.36	.720

The model accounted for a very small amount of variance, $R^2 = .001$, $F(1, 148) = 0.13$, $p = .720$, with a Pearson correlation of $r = .030$ between time spent and academic impact. Time spent on social media alone was not a statistically significant predictor of overall academic impact ($B = .021$, 95% CI [-.094, .136]) in this sample. This does not show that time spent is unrelated to academic outcomes; it indicates only that no statistically significant linear association was detected.

7. Discussion

The results of the study reveal that the relationship between social media use and perceived academic outcomes is not as clear as the "more time online, worse outcomes" would predict. The most obvious result was that measurement of raw time spent on social media was not a statistically significant predictor of the composite academic-impact score. In contrast, indicators of how and why social media was used were more consistently related to perceived academic outcomes. In line with a Uses and Gratifications interpretation, wherein the content of social media, rather than the length of time on social media, may be more important for understanding subject interest, all six items tested showed positive relationships between perceived academic help of educational content and subject interest. Likewise, the loss of study time due to social media distraction was also a significant factor in perceived academic loss, though in this case, some of the weaker aspects of this relationship (forgetting deadlines, poor understanding, low scores, lack of engagement with real-world work) were not significant. These findings are only partly consistent with the displacement hypothesis, which predicts a negative association between time spent and outcomes that was not observed here; however, the correlations were modest and based on self-reported perceptions, so no causal inference is possible.

The null finding for time spent should also be interpreted with consideration of the measurement of time. The study employed a single self-reported categorical measure of the duration of daily use, which does not differentiate problematic or addictive use, social media multitasking during study, and self-regulation, which recent meta-analytic evidence has shown to be associated with academic performance (Paterna et al., 2024; Salari et al., 2025). The result was also subjective rather than objective academic performance, which might

be the reason why the result of the present study differs from Sadia et al. (2025), who used a different sample, instrument, and test to get the result and found that there is a significant association between social media use and academic performance among the students of the University of Sargodha. Future research should include validated assessments of problematic use and self-regulated learning (SRL), as well as records of institutional performance, along with duration.

Overall, the widespread culture of checking social media during study, the possible link between frequent checking and FoMO-related anxiety (not directly tested in this study), and the majority (59.3%) who reported feeling at least somewhat less confident after seeing others' success on social media platforms like Instagram collectively point to the importance of psychological and attentional relationships with social media. Because there were no significant age or education effects on attention-related consequences, these appear to be widely distributed across all age and education groups.

The demographic analysis of the sample showed that most of the respondents were urban (78.0%) and a majority (59.3%) reported feeling at least somewhat less confident after seeing others' success on social media, which suggests that social comparison may be a common experience in this group. However, the questionnaire did not measure cultural-specific factors against the outcome measures. The present data therefore cannot show whether cultural pressures specific to Pakistani female students influenced patterns of social media use or perceived academic outcomes. The cultural context in the introduction should accordingly be read as a contextual motivation for the study rather than a tested finding, and future research should include measures of different cultural factors and compare students across residence and family contexts.

8. Conclusion

The current study focused on the perceived association between the use of social media and perceived academic outcomes of 150 female university students at the University of Sargodha. Social media plays a significant role in students' lives, with over half of respondents using social media for five or more hours a day, and with Instagram being the most used platform (54.0%). It is pertinent to mention that the volume of time spent on social media was not significantly correlated with perceived academic effects. Rather, the academic value of content accessed through social media and the amount of study time that is lost to distraction were more meaningfully correlated with academic interest and academic loss, respectively. These findings tentatively suggest that future research on interventions should consider the purpose and processes behind social media use, in addition to the amount of time students spend on it; the present study did not test interventions. The findings should be interpreted cautiously given the cross-sectional design, the convenience sample from a single university, and the reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than objective academic measures; they do not establish causal effects.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical and similarity-index policies of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan and the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their responses were kept anonymous and voluntary throughout.

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