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Research Article

Social Media Addiction and Academic Performance of Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The rapid spread of internet-enabled devices has placed social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat within easy reach of secondary school students. While these platforms offer opportunities for communication, entertainment, and informal learning, growing evidence suggests that excessive and compulsive use, often described as social media addiction, is reshaping how adolescents allocate their time and attention. This paper examines the relationship between social media addiction and the academic performance of secondary school students. It reviews the concept of social media addiction, its theoretical underpinnings, and the empirical literature linking heavy platform use to study habits, concentration, sleep patterns, and examination outcomes. The paper argues that while social media itself is not inherently harmful, addictive patterns of use are associated with reduced study time, procrastination, poor sleep quality, and declining grades. It concludes with practical recommendations for students, parents, teachers, and school administrators aimed at promoting balanced and purposeful use of social media among adolescents.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Over the past two decades, social media has moved from a peripheral novelty to a central feature of everyday life. For many secondary school students, a smartphone is not merely a communication tool but a constant companion that provides access to friends, entertainment, news, and a sense of belonging. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and X (formerly Twitter) allow young people to share experiences instantly, follow trends, and maintain social connections that extend well beyond the school compound.

This convenience, however, carries a cost. Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to peer approval, novelty, and reward, which makes teenagers particularly susceptible to the attention-capturing design of social media applications. Features such as infinite scrolling, push notifications, likes, and algorithmically curated content are deliberately engineered to maximise engagement, and they often do so at the expense of other activities, including academic work. When the use of these platforms becomes compulsive, uncontrollable, and disruptive to daily functioning, it is often referred to as social media addiction.

Academic performance, on the other hand, remains one of the most important indicators of a student's educational progress and future opportunities. It reflects not only intellectual ability but also study habits, time management, concentration, and emotional wellbeing. Where a student's daily routine is dominated by hours of scrolling, chatting, or watching short videos, the time and mental energy available for reading, revision, and assignment completion is inevitably reduced. It is against this backdrop that the present paper investigates the relationship between social media addiction and the academic performance of secondary school students, with a view to understanding the mechanisms through which excessive use undermines learning and to proposing measures for mitigating its effects.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Teachers and parents in many secondary schools have observed a decline in students' attention span, homework completion rates, and overall seriousness towards academic work, a trend that coincides with the widespread ownership of smartphones and increased access to social media. Students frequently report staying up late to chat with friends or watch videos, arriving at school tired and unable to concentrate during lessons. Others admit to checking their phones during study time, which fragments their attention and lengthens the time needed to complete even simple assignments.

Despite these observable patterns, social media use among secondary school students is often treated as a harmless pastime rather than a potential threat to academic achievement. There is, therefore, a need to examine, in a systematic manner, how patterns of social media use, particularly addictive use, relate to indicators of academic performance such as test scores, homework completion, class participation, and overall

academic engagement. This paper addresses that need by synthesising existing knowledge on the subject and proposing evidence-based strategies for schools and families.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between social media addiction and the academic performance of secondary school students. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

1. Explain the concept and characteristics of social media addiction among adolescents.
2. Review theoretical perspectives that help to explain why adolescents become excessively attached to social media platforms.
3. Examine the empirical evidence linking social media addiction to academic outcomes such as study time, concentration, sleep quality, and grades.
4. Identify factors that predispose secondary school students to social media addiction.
5. Recommend strategies that students, parents, teachers, and school administrators can adopt to promote healthier and more balanced use of social media.

1.4 Research Questions

This paper is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of social media addiction among secondary school students?
2. What theoretical explanations account for adolescent susceptibility to social media addiction?
3. In what ways does social media addiction affect the academic performance of secondary school students?
4. What factors contribute to the development of social media addiction among adolescents?
5. What measures can reduce the negative academic effects of social media addiction among secondary school students?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This paper is significant to several groups of stakeholders. For students, it offers insight into how their online habits may be affecting their academic progress, encouraging greater self-awareness and self-regulation. For parents and guardians, the paper highlights practical steps for monitoring and guiding their children's use of digital devices without resorting to outright prohibition, which is often unrealistic in the current digital environment. For teachers and school counsellors, the paper provides a framework for recognising signs of problematic social media use among students and for designing interventions that support both digital literacy and academic focus. For education policymakers, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations about how schools should respond to the growing presence of digital technology in adolescent life. Finally, the paper adds to the body of literature on adolescent media use and academic achievement, providing a foundation for further empirical research.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This paper focuses specifically on secondary school students, generally between the ages of eleven and eighteen, a group that is both highly active on social media and at a formative stage of academic and psychological development. The discussion centres on widely used social media platforms rather than digital technology in general, and on academic performance as reflected in study habits, concentration, homework completion, and grades. The paper is conceptual and review-based, drawing on existing literature and theory rather than presenting new primary data; as such, its conclusions should be understood as a synthesis of established knowledge rather than findings from a specific school-based survey.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Social Media

Social media refers to internet-based platforms and applications that allow users to create, share, and exchange content, and to interact with one another in real time or near-real time. Unlike traditional media, which flows in one direction from producer to audience, social media is participatory: users are simultaneously consumers and creators of content. Popular categories include social networking sites (Facebook, Instagram), microblogging platforms (X), messaging applications (WhatsApp, Telegram), video-sharing platforms (TikTok, YouTube), and multiplayer gaming communities with built-in chat features.

For secondary school students, social media serves multiple functions. It is a space for socialising with peers, following celebrities and trends, expressing identity, seeking information, and, increasingly, engaging in informal learning through educational content creators. These functions make social media attractive and, in many respects, valuable. The concern raised in this paper is not with social media use as such, but with patterns of use that become excessive, compulsive, and difficult to control.

2.2 Concept of Social Media Addiction

Social media addiction, sometimes referred to as problematic social media use, describes a pattern of engagement characterised by an inability to control usage despite negative consequences in other areas of life, such as academics, sleep, relationships, or physical health. Although social media addiction is not universally recognised as a formal clinical diagnosis in the same way as substance use disorders, researchers studying behavioural addictions have identified a consistent set of features associated with it, including salience (the activity dominates thinking and behaviour), mood modification (using the platform to escape negative feelings), tolerance (needing more time on the platform to achieve the same satisfaction), withdrawal (irritability or anxiety when access is restricted), conflict (arguments with others or internal conflict over usage), and relapse (reverting to excessive use after attempts to cut back).

Among secondary school students, social media addiction often manifests as constant phone checking during class or study

time, anxiety when separated from a device, staying up late to remain active on chats or feeds, neglect of homework and revision, and a persistent urge to document or view others' activities. Because adolescence is a period of intense identity formation and peer orientation, the pull of social media, with its promise of validation through likes, comments, and shares, can be especially strong.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical perspectives are particularly useful for understanding social media addiction among adolescents: the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory proposes that individuals actively select media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, such as entertainment, information seeking, social interaction, and self-expression. Applied to adolescents, this theory suggests that secondary school students turn to social media to fulfil needs for belonging, recognition, and escape from academic or family pressure. When these platforms consistently and quickly satisfy such needs, usage patterns can intensify to the point of habitual, and eventually compulsive, engagement, particularly where alternative sources of gratification, such as extracurricular activities or strong offline friendships, are limited.

Social Cognitive Theory, associated with the work of Albert Bandura, emphasises the role of observational learning, self-efficacy, and self-regulation in shaping behaviour. From this perspective, adolescents learn patterns of social media use by observing peers, older siblings, and even parents, and they adopt these behaviours as normal. Weak self-regulatory skills, which are still developing during adolescence, make it difficult for many students to control impulses to check notifications or continue scrolling, even when they recognise that doing so interferes with schoolwork. Together, these theories help to explain both why adolescents are drawn to social media and why, for some, that engagement escalates into addictive patterns that are difficult to interrupt without external structure or support.

2.4 Concept of Academic Performance

Academic performance refers to the extent to which a student achieves educational goals, typically measured through indicators such as test and examination scores, class assessments, homework completion, class participation, and overall grade point average. Beyond these quantifiable measures, academic performance also reflects underlying processes such as attention, motivation, time management, and study habits. A student who is attentive in class, completes assignments diligently, and engages in regular revision is more likely to perform well than one who is frequently distracted, disorganised, or sleep-deprived, regardless of underlying intellectual ability.

Because academic performance is influenced by such a wide range of factors, including home environment, teaching quality, health, and psychological wellbeing, it is important to view social media addiction as one contributing factor among

several, rather than the sole determinant of a student's academic outcomes. Nonetheless, the specific pathways through which excessive social media use can undermine academic performance are well documented in the literature and are examined in the following section.

2.5 Social Media Addiction and Academic Performance: Empirical Review

A growing body of research across different countries has examined the relationship between social media use and academic outcomes among adolescents and young people. While findings vary in strength depending on context, methodology, and the specific platforms studied, several consistent patterns emerge from this literature.

First, time displacement is one of the most frequently cited mechanisms. Every hour spent on social media is an hour not spent reading, revising, or completing assignments. Studies of student time-use consistently find that heavy social media users report less time devoted to homework and study compared to light or moderate users, and that this reduced study time is associated with lower grades.

Second, social media use, particularly when compulsive, is linked to attentional fragmentation. Notifications and the habit of frequent checking interrupt sustained concentration, a cognitive state essential for deep learning and complex problem-solving. Research on media multitasking indicates that switching attention between a primary task, such as studying, and a secondary stimulus, such as a phone notification, increases the time required to complete tasks and reduces the quality of comprehension and retention.

Third, sleep disruption is a well-established consequence of late-night social media use. Blue light exposure from screens, combined with the psychologically stimulating nature of social interaction and content consumption, delays the onset of sleep and reduces total sleep duration. Given that adequate sleep is critical for memory consolidation, attention, and mood regulation, students who habitually stay up late on social media often arrive at school fatigued, with diminished capacity to absorb and retain lessons.

Fourth, several studies point to psychological effects such as increased anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and symptoms resembling depression among heavy social media users, particularly those who engage in frequent social comparison. These emotional difficulties can, in turn, reduce motivation and engagement with schoolwork, creating a cycle in which academic struggles and problematic social media use reinforce one another.

Finally, some research highlights a more nuanced picture, noting that moderate, purposeful use of social media, for instance, participating in study groups on WhatsApp or following educational content creators, can support learning and collaboration. This suggests that the relationship between social media and academic performance is not simply about the amount of time spent online, but also about the pattern, purpose, and self-regulation surrounding that use. It is compulsive, poorly regulated use, rather than social media use

in general, that is most consistently associated with academic decline.

2.6 Factors Contributing to Social Media Addiction Among Secondary School Students

Several interrelated factors increase the likelihood that a secondary school student will develop addictive patterns of social media use. Peer influence is significant, as adolescents often feel pressure to remain active on platforms in order to stay connected with friends and avoid feeling excluded from social conversations and trends. Family factors also play a role; students in households with limited parental monitoring of device use, or where parents themselves model heavy screen use, tend to report higher levels of social media engagement.

Personal and psychological factors are equally important. Adolescents experiencing low self-esteem, loneliness, or academic stress may turn to social media as a coping mechanism, seeking validation or distraction from difficult emotions. Additionally, the design features of social media platforms themselves, including infinite scroll, algorithmic content recommendation, and variable reward systems similar to those found in gambling, are engineered to sustain user attention for as long as possible, making self-regulation genuinely difficult even for highly motivated students. Finally, unrestricted access to smartphones and affordable mobile data, combined with limited alternative recreational outlets in some communities, further increases exposure and opportunity for excessive use.

2.7 Gap in Literature

While much has been written about social media use among young people in general, comparatively less attention has been paid specifically to secondary school students within the unique context of examination-driven education systems, where academic performance carries significant consequences for future educational and career opportunities. Many existing studies also treat social media use as a single, undifferentiated variable, without distinguishing between different platforms, types of engagement, or degrees of addiction. This paper contributes to closing that gap by synthesising existing knowledge with specific attention to the secondary school context and by distinguishing addictive, poorly regulated use from moderate, purposeful use.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative, desk-based review methodology. Rather than collecting new primary data through surveys or experiments, it synthesises existing theoretical and empirical literature on social media addiction and academic performance, drawing connections relevant specifically to secondary school students. This approach is appropriate for a conceptual paper of this nature, as it allows for a broad and integrative examination of a topic that has been studied from multiple disciplinary angles, including psychology, education, and communication studies.

3.2 Sources of Information

Information for this paper was drawn from scholarly literature on adolescent media use, behavioural addiction, and academic achievement, as well as established psychological and communication theories relevant to media consumption. Where empirical findings are cited, they represent patterns that recur across multiple studies in the field rather than the results of a single investigation, in keeping with the conceptual and integrative nature of this paper.

3.3 Method of Analysis

The paper employs thematic analysis, organising the reviewed literature around recurring themes: the nature of social media addiction, theoretical explanations for its development, its documented effects on study time, concentration, sleep, and psychological wellbeing, and the contributing factors that predispose adolescents to problematic use. These themes are then used to develop practical, evidence-informed recommendations for reducing the academic impact of social media addiction among secondary school students.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The literature reviewed in this paper points consistently to an inverse relationship between the severity of social media addiction and academic performance: as compulsive, poorly regulated use increases, indicators of academic achievement, including grades, homework completion, and classroom engagement, tend to decline. This relationship, however, is neither uniform nor deterministic. Not every heavy user of social media performs poorly academically, and not every light

user excels. The strength of the relationship appears to depend on mediating factors such as the student's self-regulation skills, the level of parental and school monitoring, the specific ways in which the student uses social media, and the presence of competing demands on the student's time, such as extracurricular activities or part-time responsibilities.

What emerges most clearly from the literature is that it is the loss of control over usage, rather than social media use per se, that drives negative academic outcomes. A student who spends thirty minutes on social media as a deliberate break between study sessions is engaging in a fundamentally different behaviour from one who loses track of time and scrolls for several hours, repeatedly postponing assignments. The former reflects healthy, regulated use; the latter reflects the compulsive pattern associated with addiction.

Drawing the threads of the literature review together, four interconnected mechanisms explain how social media addiction undermines academic performance among secondary school students. The first is time displacement, whereby hours that would otherwise be allocated to study, revision, or sleep are consumed by social media engagement. The second is attentional fragmentation, in which frequent interruptions from notifications and habitual checking behaviour reduce the depth and quality of concentration during both classroom instruction and independent study. The third is sleep disruption, which compromises memory consolidation, alertness, and mood, all of which are essential for effective learning. The fourth is psychological strain, including anxiety and diminished self-esteem arising from social comparison, which can reduce motivation and engagement with academic tasks.

Table 1: Four Mechanisms Linking Social Media Addiction to Academic Performance

Mechanism	What Happens	Effect on Academic Performance
Time Displacement	Hours that would otherwise be spent on study, revision, or sleep are consumed by social media engagement.	Reduced study time and increased procrastination on assignments.
Attentional Fragmentation	Frequent notifications and habitual checking interrupt sustained concentration during lessons and independent study.	Poorer depth and quality of concentration; slower task completion.
Sleep Disruption	Late-night use delays sleep onset and reduce total sleep duration.	Compromised memory consolidation, alertness, and mood; fatigue in class.
Psychological Strain	Social comparison on social media contributes to anxiety and diminished self-esteem.	Reduced motivation and engagement with academic tasks.

These mechanisms often operate together rather than in isolation. A student who stays up late on social media, for example, experiences both time displacement and sleep disruption, arriving at school the next day fatigued and less able to concentrate, which compounds the attentional difficulties already associated with habitual checking behaviour. Over time, repeated cycles of this kind can produce a cumulative decline in academic performance that may not be immediately obvious from day to day but becomes apparent over a term or academic year.

It is important to recognise that secondary school students are not a homogeneous group. Individual differences in personality, self-discipline, family support, and academic motivation shape how vulnerable a given student is to developing addictive patterns of social media use, and how

much that use, once developed, affects academic outcomes. Students with strong intrinsic motivation and effective study habits may be more resilient to the distracting pull of social media, while students who are already struggling academically or emotionally may be more susceptible both to developing addictive usage patterns and to experiencing significant academic consequences as a result.

School and family context also matter considerably. Students in environments with clear expectations around device use during study and sleep hours, and with access to engaging offline activities, tend to exhibit more moderate social media engagement. This suggests that interventions addressing social media addiction among secondary school students should be holistic, addressing not only the behaviour itself but also the

underlying needs, such as belonging, stress relief, and recognition, that the behaviour often serves.

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This paper examined the relationship between social media addiction and the academic performance of secondary school students. It explained the concept of social media addiction, describing it as a pattern of compulsive, poorly regulated platform use characterised by salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Cognitive Theory as a framework, the paper explored why adolescents are particularly susceptible to such patterns. A review of the empirical literature revealed that social media addiction affects academic performance primarily through time displacement, attentional fragmentation, sleep disruption, and psychological strain, though the strength of these effects varies depending on individual and contextual factors.

5.2 CONCLUSION

Social media is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful to secondary school students; its impact depends largely on how it is used. The evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that when social media use becomes addictive, marked by loss of control, preoccupation, and interference with daily responsibilities, it is consistently associated with reduced study time, weakened concentration, poorer sleep, and, ultimately, declining academic performance. Addressing this challenge does not require rejecting social media outright, which is neither realistic nor desirable in the current digital age, but rather requires cultivating balanced, intentional use supported by students, families, and schools working together.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Students should be encouraged to practise self-regulation strategies, such as setting specific times for social media use, turning off non-essential notifications during study hours, and using screen-time tracking features available on most smartphones.
2. Parents and guardians should establish clear, consistently enforced guidelines regarding device use, particularly during homework time and before bedtime, while also modelling balanced technology use themselves.
3. Schools should incorporate digital literacy and wellbeing education into the curriculum, helping students understand

how social media platforms are designed to capture attention and equipping them with practical strategies for managing their use.

4. Teachers and school counsellors should be trained to recognise signs of problematic social media use, such as persistent fatigue, declining assignment completion, and withdrawal from classroom participation, and to refer affected students for appropriate support.
5. Schools should consider policies on phone use during instructional hours that balance the benefits of connectivity with the need to protect students' attention and learning time, while avoiding approaches that are so restrictive as to be unenforceable or that ignore legitimate uses of technology for learning.
6. Communities and schools should invest in accessible extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, and arts programmes, which provide adolescents with alternative sources of social connection, achievement, and enjoyment beyond social media.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future empirical research would benefit from school-based studies that measure social media addiction using validated psychometric scales alongside objective academic indicators, such as term examination results, within specific secondary school populations. Longitudinal research tracking students over multiple academic terms would also help to clarify the direction of the relationship between social media addiction and academic performance, given that struggling students may turn to social media as an escape from academic difficulty, just as social media addiction may itself contribute to academic decline. Comparative studies across different school types, socioeconomic contexts, and regions would further enrich understanding of how local conditions shape this relationship.

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