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Scrolling Between Lectures: Social Media, Academic Identity, and Learning Practices Among Social Work Students in a Nigerian University

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Abstract

This study examines how social media relates to the academic identities, learning practices, and perceived educational experiences of undergraduate social work students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, the study distinguishes between students' acceptance of social media and the purposes for which they use it. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted among 459 undergraduate social work students. A statistically determined sample of 214 students was selected through proportionate stratified sampling across four academic levels, and 200 valid questionnaires were analysed. Data were summarised using frequencies and percentages, while chi-square tests examined associations between selected social-media practices and reported academic performance. Social media was embedded in students' daily routines: 60% checked it first thing in the morning, 62.5% reported increased use during the previous year, and 69% followed academic-related groups or pages. Facebook was the most regularly used platform and smartphones were the dominant access device. At the same time, 62.5% regarded social media as a distraction from academic work, 56.5% reported missing deadlines or assignments because of time spent online, and 44% perceived a negative effect on their academic performance. Academic-oriented engagement was significantly associated with higher reported academic performance, while frequent use was associated with lower reported performance. Because the study is cross-sectional and relies on self-reported measures, the findings indicate association and perception rather than causation. The study recommends structured academic groups, digital-literacy education, ethical online communication, and digital-wellbeing support in social work education....

Keywords social media; academic identity; digital learning; social work education; Nigerian universities; student media practices; academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

A student scrolling through a social media feed during a lecture is often interpreted as inattentive, disengaged, or academically unprepared. Yet scrolling is not always a departure from learning. A student may be checking a class announcement, responding to a group discussion, searching for an explanation of a difficult concept, viewing a professional social-work post, or moving between academic and recreational content within the same digital environment. The apparent opposition between "social media" and "study" therefore requires closer examination. Among university students, social media has become part of the ordinary infrastructure of everyday life. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X provide spaces for communication, entertainment, information exchange, peer support, and self-presentation. These platforms also create new forms of visibility. Students do not simply consume content; they comment, share, circulate, interpret, and reframe information. They construct identities through their participation in networked publics and develop relationships that may extend beyond the classroom.

For social work students, these developments are particularly significant. Social work education combines theoretical learning, professional preparation, ethical reflection, interpersonal communication, and field-based practice. Students are expected to develop not only academic competence but also an emerging professional identity. Digital platforms can support this process by enabling students to join professional networks, access social-work information, share educational resources, and discuss social problems. At the same time, social media can blur boundaries between personal and professional communication, expose students to misinformation, intensify peer pressure, and compete with sustained attention to academic tasks.

Previous studies have produced mixed findings regarding the relationship between social media and academic performance. Some studies associate intensive or poorly regulated use with distraction, procrastination, reduced study time, missed deadlines, and lower grades (Apuke, 2016; Barton et al., 2021; Kolan & Dzandza, 2018). Other studies suggest that social media can facilitate collaborative learning, peer interaction, knowledge sharing, and academic engagement when used for clearly defined educational purposes (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Chukwuere,

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2021). This tension indicates that the question is not simply whether students use social media, but how, why, when, and with what consequences they use it.

This study focuses on undergraduate social work students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It examines the extent and pattern of use, the platforms and devices involved, students' academic and non-academic purposes, and their perceptions of the relationship between social media and learning. Academic identity is used to connect students' everyday media practices with their developing sense of themselves as learners and future social-work professionals.

The study addresses five questions: How extensively do undergraduate social work students use social media? Which platforms and devices structure their everyday practices? What academic, social, informational, and recreational purposes motivate their use? How do students perceive the relationship between social media and their academic performance? What institutional strategies may strengthen educational value while reducing distraction?

Social Media, Learning, and Academic Identity

Social media can function as a learning environment because students can ask questions, exchange notes, recommend articles, share video tutorials, and coordinate group work outside formal classroom sessions. The student is not merely a recipient of information but also a contributor, curator, commentator, and distributor. This participatory character can support informal and collaborative learning (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Chukwuere, 2021). However, educational potential does not automatically produce academic benefit. Notifications, personalised recommendations, short-form content, and rapid transitions between topics can fragment attention. A student who begins by searching for a lecture-related video may quickly encounter entertainment, advertising, political content, or interpersonal messages. Intensive or poorly regulated use has been associated with procrastination, reduced study time, missed deadlines, and lower academic outcomes (Apuke, 2016; Barton et al., 2021; Kolan & Dzandza, 2018).

Academic identity refers to how students understand and present themselves as learners within institutional, peer, and professional contexts. Social media provides spaces where students may join academic groups, circulate research information, follow professional associations, share achievements, and discuss social problems. These activities may strengthen belonging to a field of study and expose social work students to debates about welfare, inequality, mental health, child protection, disability, gender, and community development.

Academic identity may also be weakened when participation is primarily oriented toward comparison, entertainment, or social approval. Students may begin to measure success through visibility and peer recognition rather than sustained learning. The same digital environment can therefore support professional aspiration while intensifying distraction and anxiety.

Academic identity in networked spaces

Academic identity refers to how students understand and present themselves as learners within institutional, peer, and professional contexts. It includes students' sense of academic belonging, commitment to learning, confidence in their abilities, and emerging orientation toward a future profession.

Social media provides spaces in which academic identity can be performed and negotiated. Students may join academic groups, circulate research information, follow professional associations, share achievements, or participate in discussions about social problems. These activities may strengthen their sense of belonging to a field of study. For social work students, digital participation can also expose them to debates about welfare, inequality, mental health, child protection, disability, gender, and community development.

Yet academic identity may also be weakened when social media participation becomes primarily oriented toward comparison, entertainment, or social approval. A student may begin to measure personal success through visibility, likes, and peer recognition rather than through sustained engagement with learning. The same digital environment can therefore support professional aspiration while intensifying distraction and anxiety.

Theoretical framework

The study integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory because they explain different but complementary dimensions of students' social-media practices. TAM explains the technology-acceptance process: students are more likely to adopt and continue using social-media platforms when they perceive them as useful and easy to use (Davis, 1989). In this study, perceived usefulness refers to the belief that social media can improve academic communication, information access, peer learning, professional networking, and social-work identity development. Perceived ease of use refers to the convenience and accessibility of using platforms through smartphones and other digital devices.

U&G theory explains the motivational process that accompanies acceptance. It treats users as active participants who select media to satisfy needs such as information seeking, academic interaction, social connection, entertainment, identity formation, career development, and stress relief (Katz et al., 1974). Thus, TAM explains

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why students accept and use social media, while U&G explains what they seek from that use. TAM and U&G are complementary rather than competing perspectives: acceptance makes use possible, while motivations and gratifications shape the form, content, and direction of that use.

Together, the theories suggest that academic outcomes are shaped by the interaction among perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, usage motives, intensity, platform affordances, and self-regulation. Purpose-driven academic use may strengthen learning, belonging, and emerging professional identity, whereas habitual or leisure-oriented use may increase distraction and weaken sustained academic engagement. Students may consciously use social media for academic reasons while also experiencing habitual checking, fear of missing out, and difficulty regulating attention. The integrated framework therefore links technology acceptance to media motivation and then to learning practices and academic identity, without assuming that either theory alone determines academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and setting

The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. It was conducted among undergraduate social work students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The university is a major Nigerian institution with a large and diverse student population. The social work programme prepares students for professional practice through courses in social work theory, human behaviour, social policy, research, community practice, and field education.

Population and sample

The study population comprised 459 undergraduate social work students distributed across four years of study: 134 students in the first year, 107 in the second year, 120 in the third year, and 98 in the fourth year. A sample size of 214 was calculated using the Taro Yamane formula:

n=N1+N(e2)n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}n=1+N(e2)N

where nnn represents the sample size, NNN the population size, and eee the level of precision. With N=459N = 459N=459 and e=.05e = .05e=.05, the estimated sample was approximately 214 students.

The project reports that 214 questionnaires were distributed and 200 valid responses were analysed. The final response rate was therefore 93.5%. The respondents comprised 90 males (45%) and 110 females (55%). Participants were distributed evenly across the four years of study, with 50 respondents from each year.

Instrument and procedure

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled the Social Media Impact on Academic Performance Questionnaire. The instrument was developed from the study objectives, the constructs of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, and relevant empirical literature on students' social-media use, academic engagement, digital identity, and perceived academic outcomes. The questionnaire gathered information on demographic characteristics, frequency and duration of social-media use, preferred platforms, devices used, purposes of use, academic participation, perceived distraction, missed deadlines, and perceptions of academic performance.

The draft questionnaire was reviewed by three specialists in social work education, research methodology, and educational technology to assess the clarity, relevance, and adequacy of the items. Based on their feedback, ambiguous wording was revised, repetitive items were removed, and the sequencing of questions was improved. The revised instrument was pilot-tested with 30 undergraduate social work students from a different university who were not included in the final study. Feedback from the pilot test confirmed that the items were understandable and that the estimated completion time was approximately 15 minutes. No substantial changes were required following the pilot test.

Internal consistency of the multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients were 0.78 for the social-media use scale, 0.81 for the academic engagement scale, and 0.76 for the perceived academic performance scale, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Descriptive items, such as preferred platform and device, were treated as categorical questions and were not included in the internal-consistency analysis.

The questionnaire was distributed to students over a one-week period. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, before data collection commenced. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to participate voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and no identifying information was collected on the questionnaires.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Chi-square tests were used to examine relationships between selected social-media variables and reported academic performance. Statistical significance was assessed at the .05 level.

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Because the study relied on self-reported measures and a cross-sectional design, the findings indicate association and perception rather than causation. The phrase "academic performance" in the results should therefore be understood as **reported or perceived academic performance**, unless verified GPA data were collected.

FINDINGS

Respondent profile

The respondents were predominantly female, although the difference was not substantial. Forty-five percent were male and 55% were female. Participants ranged in age from below 20 to 30 years and above. The largest age group was 20–24 years, representing 40% of the sample, followed by 25–29 years at 30%, below 20 years at 20%, and 30 years or above at 10%.

The equal distribution across the four academic years allowed the study to reflect the experiences of students at different stages of the social work programme.

Everyday intensity of social-media use

Social media was embedded in students' daily routines. Sixty percent reported checking social media first thing in the morning, while 62.5% stated that their social-media use had increased during the previous year. Daily duration varied: 25% used social media for less than one hour, 37.5% for one to two hours, 28% for three to four hours, and 9.5% for four hours or more.

Although the reported duration appears moderate for many respondents, the timing of use is important. Social media was not confined to leisure periods. Students reported using it while studying or doing homework, during lectures, during breaks, and during general free time.

Table 1. Daily social-media use

Daily duration	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	50	25.0
1–2 hours	75	37.5
3–4 hours	56	28.0
4 hours and above	19	9.5
Total	**200**	**100.0**

The findings also indicate a level of emotional attachment to social media. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported feeling anxious or uncomfortable when they could not access social media. Among those who experienced anxiety, 44% attributed it to fear of missing important information, while 37.5% associated it with missing contact with friends.

These results suggest that social media was not merely an optional leisure activity. For many students, it had become part of the rhythm of daily information seeking, social connection, and academic coordination.

Platforms, devices, and academic participation

Facebook was the most regularly used platform, reported by 44% of respondents. It was followed by X/Twitter at 19%, Instagram at 15.5%, LinkedIn at 9.5%, WhatsApp at 6.5%, and TikTok at 5%. When respondents identified the platform on which they spent the most time, Facebook remained the leading platform at 31.5%, followed by WhatsApp at 25% and Instagram at 19%.

The dominance of smartphones was pronounced. Sixty-two-point-five percent of respondents accessed their preferred platforms primarily through smartphones, compared with 25% who used computers or laptops and 9.5% who used tablets.

The use of social media was not exclusively recreational. Thirty-one-point-five percent identified academic work as their main purpose, while others reported business, entertainment, networking, news, and communication. Sixty-nine percent followed academic-related groups or pages, and 62.5% participated in academic discussions or forums.

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Table 2. Academic uses of social media

Academic practice	Frequency	Percentage
Follow academic-related groups or pages	138	69.0
Participate in academic discussions or forums	125	62.5
Engage with field-related content always or often	113	56.5
Use social media primarily for academic purposes	63	31.5
Prefer video tutorials as academic content	63	31.5
Willing to join a field-specific academic group	150	75.0

Students preferred academic content was practical and accessible. Video tutorials were the most preferred form of academic content, followed by lecture notes, discussion forums, online quizzes, and research articles. Seventy-five percent indicated that they would participate in a social-media group dedicated to their academic field. The most frequently cited reasons were career advancement and opportunities, sharing opinions, and networking.
These findings reveal the importance of social media in the formation of academic and professional identity. Students were not only using social media to obtain information; they also wanted to connect their academic lives to future career opportunities.

Distraction, interruption, and academic consequences

The educational potential of social media coexisted with considerable concern about distraction. Sixty-two-point-five percent of respondents believed that social media distracted them from academic work, and the same proportion believed that it affected their academic concentration. Forty-four percent perceived that social media had affected their academic performance negatively, compared with 37.5% who perceived a positive effect and 19% who reported no effect.
More than half of the respondents, 56.5%, stated that they had missed deadlines or assignments because of time spent on social media. This is a significant finding because it moves beyond general concern about distraction and identifies a concrete academic consequence.

Table 3. Perceived academic consequences

Perceived consequence	Frequency	Percentage
Social media distracts from academic work	125	62.5
Social media affects academic concentration	125	62.5
Negative perceived effect on academic performance	88	44.0
Positive perceived effect on academic performance	75	37.5
Missed deadlines or assignments	113	56.5

Students' self-regulation strategies were uneven. Thirty-one-point-five percent used social media only after completing academic work, 25% reported having a strict schedule, and 19% used social media during academic breaks. However, another 19% reported having no specific strategy. Among respondents who had attempted to reduce their use, 37.5% used self-imposed limits, 28% took temporary social-media breaks, and 25% used time-management applications.
These results indicate that students were aware of the risks but did not always possess stable mechanisms for managing them. Social media use was therefore shaped by a tension between intention and habit.

Association between social-media practices and reported performance

The first chi-square test examined the relationship between frequency of social-media use and reported academic performance. The project reports a statistically significant association, $\chi 2(1)=7.537\backslash chi^2(1) = 7.537\chi 2(1)=7.537$,

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p=.023p = .023p=.023. Students classified as frequent users were more likely to report lower academic performance than infrequent users.

The second test examined engagement in academic-related social-media activities. The reported result was statistically significant, $\chi2(1)=22.5\chi^2(1) = 22.5\chi2(1)=22.5$, $p<.001p < .001p<.001$. Students who engaged in academic-related activities were more likely to report higher academic performance than those who primarily used social media for leisure.

The third test examined whether perceiving social media as a valuable educational tool was associated with academic performance. The relationship was also reported as statistically significant, $\chi2(1)=22.5\chi^2(1) = 22.5\chi2(1)=22.5$, $p<.001p < .001p<.001$. Students who perceived social media as educationally valuable were more likely to report positive academic effects than those who primarily viewed it as a distraction.

These results should be interpreted cautiously. The tables in the original project appear to use constructed categories of "high" and "low" academic performance, but the operational definition and measurement procedure are not sufficiently documented. In addition, some reported cell counts and percentages require verification against the original dataset. The findings can support claims about association, but not causal claims that social media directly produces high or low academic performance.

DISCUSSION

Social media as an ordinary academic infrastructure

The findings demonstrate that social media has become part of the everyday academic infrastructure of social work students. Checking social media in the morning, following academic groups, participating in online discussions, and accessing content through smartphones indicate that learning does not occur only within formal classroom spaces.

This does not mean that students regard all social-media activity as academic. Rather, academic and non-academic practices are interwoven. A student may move from a class announcement to a humorous video, from a professional post to a personal message, and from a lecture-related discussion to entertainment within a single session. The digital environment is therefore characterised by rapid transitions between purposes.

This pattern helps explain why students can report both academic benefits and academic harm. Social media provides access to resources and networks, but its constant availability also creates opportunities for interruption.

From use to identity

The findings concerning academic groups, career opportunities, networking, and field-related content suggest that students use social media to construct an image of themselves as emerging professionals. A field-specific group may function as more than an information channel. It may provide recognition, peer affiliation, exposure to professional language, and awareness of possible career pathways.

For social work students, this is particularly important because the profession is strongly connected to public issues and community life. Digital participation can expose students to current debates and enable them to observe how social problems are framed by institutions, organisations, practitioners, activists, and members of the public. However, professional identity formation requires critical engagement. Students must learn to distinguish evidence from opinion, advocacy from misinformation, and ethical communication from exposure of confidential information. The integration of social media into social work education should therefore include digital ethics, privacy, source evaluation, professional boundaries, and responsible communication.

The double character of distraction

The study's findings support the argument that distraction is not simply a matter of students lacking discipline. Platform environments are designed to encourage repeated checking and prolonged engagement. Notifications, social expectations, and fear of missing information may make disengagement difficult.

The fact that 65.5% of respondents reported anxiety when unable to access social media is relevant in this regard. Students may remain connected because they fear missing important academic information, group decisions, or social interactions. This produces a paradox: the same platform that students depend on for academic communication may also interrupt the concentration required to process academic material.

The reported association between frequent use and lower academic performance is consistent with studies linking intensive social-media use to reduced study time, multitasking, procrastination, and attention difficulties (Apuke, 2016; Barton et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the findings do not justify treating all frequent use as harmful. Duration alone does not reveal whether students are watching a lecture tutorial, participating in a class group, conducting research, or consuming unrelated content.

Academic use and perceived benefit

Students who engaged in academic-related activities were more likely to report higher academic performance. This finding is consistent with research that identifies peer interaction, collaborative learning, and knowledge sharing as potential benefits of social media (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Chukwuere, 2021).

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The result also reflects the importance of perceived usefulness in the Technology Acceptance Model. When students believe that social media helps them access information, receive clarification, communicate with peers, and identify career opportunities, they are more likely to integrate it into their academic lives.

However, perceived usefulness does not guarantee effective learning. Students may perceive a platform as useful while still using it in ways that disrupt concentration. The important issue is therefore the design of purposeful academic practices. For example, a lecturer or department might create a moderated group with clearly stated purposes, scheduled discussion periods, curated materials, and links to authoritative sources. Such arrangements could reduce the uncertainty and noise associated with unstructured platform use.

Implications for Social Work Education

The findings have implications for students, educators, departments, and university administrators.

Digital study practices

Students should be supported to develop practical strategies for managing attention. These may include disabling non-essential notifications during lectures, scheduling periods for social-media use, using website blockers during study sessions, and separating academic groups from entertainment feeds where possible.

The goal should not be to eliminate social media. A more realistic goal is to help students distinguish between intentional and automatic use. Intentional use is linked to a defined academic, professional, or communicative purpose. Automatic use occurs when the student opens a platform without a clear purpose and continues scrolling through algorithmically selected content.

Curriculum and digital literacy

Social work programmes should include digital literacy as part of professional preparation. Relevant topics may include:

evaluating the credibility of online information;
protecting client confidentiality;
managing professional boundaries;
responding to cyberbullying and online harassment;
identifying misinformation;
using social media for advocacy and public education;
creating accessible and ethical digital content.

This approach would treat students as future social-work professionals rather than simply as distracted technology users.

Structured academic communities

The strong willingness to join an academic field group suggests an opportunity for departments to create moderated digital communities. Such communities could be used for official announcements, peer mentoring, research opportunities, fieldwork guidance, career information, and discussion of social-work issues.

To avoid becoming another source of interruption, these groups should have clear rules concerning posting frequency, relevance, privacy, and response expectations. Academic communication should not depend entirely on constant availability.

Educational content and video learning

Students' preference for video tutorials indicates the value of short, accessible, and well-designed digital content. Lecturers may use brief videos to explain difficult concepts, introduce fieldwork procedures, summarise readings, or provide revision support. However, video content should complement rather than replace critical reading, writing, discussion, and supervised practice.

Student support and wellbeing

The reported anxiety associated with being unable to access social media suggests a need for attention to digital wellbeing. Student counselling and academic advising services can address compulsive checking, sleep disruption, fear of missing out, procrastination, and difficulties with concentration. Such support should be non-stigmatising and should recognise that social media may also provide meaningful social and academic support.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was conducted in one university and one academic discipline, so its findings should not be generalised automatically to all Nigerian university students. Self-reported data may involve recall inaccuracies, social desirability bias, and inaccurate estimation of time spent online or academic performance. The study did not use verified GPA or device-recorded screen-time data.

The cross-sectional design does not establish temporal order or causality. It cannot determine whether social-media use affects performance, whether students with academic difficulties use social media more frequently, or whether both are influenced by other factors. The use of categorical measures and chi-square tests also limits control of confounding factors and does not estimate independent effects.

Future research should compare disciplines and institutions and use longitudinal and mixed-methods designs. Surveys may be combined with verified GPA records, interviews, focus groups, digital diaries, screen-time

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records, classroom observation, and digital ethnography. Research should also examine institutional policies, digital-literacy programmes, faculty guidance, data access, privacy rules, and moderated academic groups.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media occupies an ambivalent position in the academic lives of social work students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It is a source of information, peer connection, academic discussion, career networking, and professional identity formation. At the same time, it is associated with distraction, interrupted concentration, missed deadlines, anxiety when disconnected, and perceived decline in academic performance.

The educational significance of social media depends on how students use it, what purposes it serves, how platforms organise attention, and what guidance institutions provide. The integrated TAM–U&G framework demonstrates that platform acceptance and ease of use do not determine outcomes by themselves; students' motives, gratifications, intensity, and self-regulation also matter. Universities should combine digital-literacy education, moderated academic groups, time-management support, faculty guidance, and student-wellbeing services.

Declarations

Ethical approval: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional authority at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, before data collection commenced. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access to the data may be subject to appropriate ethical, privacy, and institutional restrictions.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the publication of this article.

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