

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S DUAL ROLE AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE AND A POTENTIAL DISTRACTION WITHIN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

DR. ANAMIKA YADAV
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF ALLAHABAD,
PRAYAGARAJ-211002

Abstract

Emergence of social media as a powerful force has influenced every aspect of human life and education is also one of them. Various platforms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have transformed the way people communicate, access information, and share knowledge (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Integration of digital tools in daily life have impacted the educational settings (Tess, 2013). With the help of social media not only opportunities for learning have increased but it also serves as a tool for collaboration, resource sharing, and skill development. It helps students and educators to have meaningful discussions, to access diverse perspectives, and enhance their understanding of complex topics (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Social media act as a bridge between traditional and modern methods of teaching because of its features like real-time communication and tremendous availability of content (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). However, as it has so many benefits so been its challenges especially its quality of distraction. The above-mentioned platforms of social media have addictive nature which hinders the focus of students and productivity as well (Rosen et al., 2013). The nature of social media- as both a facilitator of learning and a potential distractor—raises important questions about its overall role in education.

Introduction

In general, social media refers to a set of online platforms, tools, and technologies that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of information, ideas and content among individuals, groups and organizations. The compound term social media emerged in the mid-1990s; Merriam-Webster records the first known use of “social media” in (1994) Linguistically, it combines the term "social media" originated from the combination of two words; Social: Referring to human interaction, relationships, and community and Media: Referring to channels or tools for communication. If we look into dictionary so,

The Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2019 defines social media as- “Forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and Page | 1 microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos)”.

According to Junco, Heibergert and Loken (2010), "social media is a collection of internet websites, service and practices that support collaboration, community building, participation and sharing". As per Battrawi and Muhtaseb (2013), "Social network may play an important role in raising awareness about the reliable resources of information among the students and society by providing alternative sources of knowledge." We all are in the current era of information and knowledge from different digital platforms or media that is called social media. This social media is an integral part of an individuals' modern life, with a significant presence of sharing knowledge and information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media offers numerous benefits as a learning tool, it is used for online discussion, quizzes, sharing information with audio, video, text, and images via YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and LinkedIn (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Tess, 2013). It also has the potential to distract students during their academic work (Examples- Attention span, Time consume, Pop-ups messages, scrolling, reels, trying to be updated always etc.) (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013).

Social media is growing at a tremendous pace. More and more people, especially the younger generation, are using social media platforms to express their opinions on all aspects. The number of users of social media is increasing. Figure 1 depicts the number of users of most famous social media platforms worldwide as of October, 2024 (Statista, 2024).

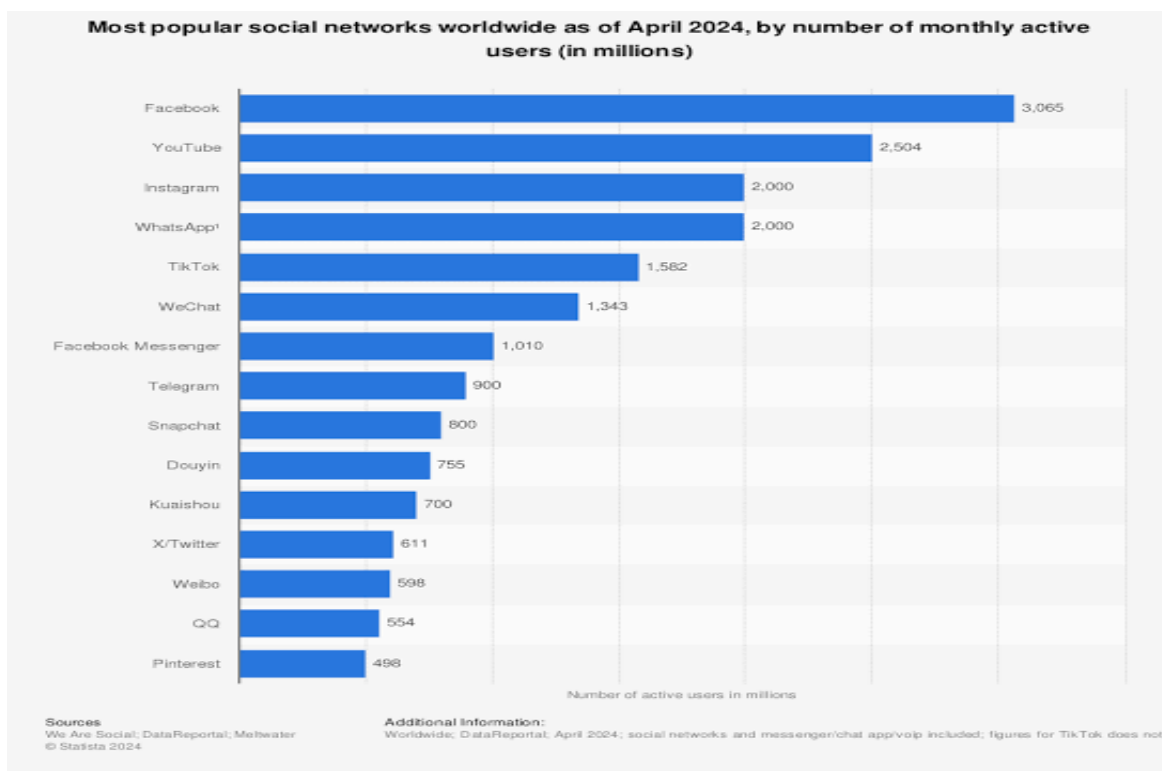


Figure 1. Number of users for popular <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>

Social Media as a Learning Tool

Al-Bahrani, Patel, and Sheridan (2015) found that using social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram can enhance student engagement by providing a more interactive and relatable learning environment. The authors surveyed students to understand their preferences and comfort levels with integrating social media into academic settings, providing insights for educators on leveraging these tools effectively.

Bredl, Hünninger, and Hansen's study (2017) explores how students use social media as a valuable tool for collaborative learning, as well as a potential source of distraction. They discuss how online environments enable students to access diverse resources and engage in both structured and informal learning experiences, though they note that excessive use can lead to attention issues and reduced productivity in educational settings. Hansen (2017) expands on this by examining the effects of social media on students' mental well-being, particularly highlighting both benefits, like enhanced social connections, and risks, such as feelings of isolation or social anxiety for certain users. These findings suggest that while social media can foster a sense of community, it

may also undermine close relationships, especially when usage patterns emphasize weaker ties or excessive interaction.

The study of Kumar and Nanda (2022), implication of social media in higher education is associated obviously with the altering nature of the students' approaching universities or institutes. Practically, social media are extremely connected, collected and created applications which reveal flexibility, fluidity and enhanced ways of communication. Considering the prominent activities of the HEIs, a framework for social media engagement has been proposed for the HEIs (Kumar and Nanda, 2019). The study similarly in addition to Kumar and Nanda (2022) explores the role of social media as a bridge between formal and informal learning environments, highlighting how these digital platforms have transformed the traditional education landscape. Specifically, the authors explore how platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn have reshaped collaborative learning, enabling new ways for students to engage in discussions, share content, and collaborate on projects.

Social Media as Potential Distractor

(Lucob et al., 2024) Findings of this study highlights a weak positive correlation between digital distraction and learning motivation, suggesting that while digital platforms aid learning, they can also detract from students' focus, especially in online environments. The study used a survey method, involving 225 college students in the Philippines revealed that there is an association between digital distraction and learning motivation. However, the link only indicates a low, practically non-existent association between digital distraction and learning motivation, which means that their relationship is only to a mild degree.

A study expanded by Hansen (2017) examining the effects of social media on students' mental well-being, particularly highlighting both benefits, like enhanced social connections, and risks, such as feelings of isolation or social anxiety for certain users. These findings suggest that while social media can foster a sense of community, it may also undermine close relationships, especially when usage patterns emphasize weaker ties or excessive interaction.

In this regard, social media can play a vital role in carrying out learning activities, which are both a learning tool and potential distractor. Social media enables students to plug into social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and more throughout the course of their everyday activities. These interactions can be used in classroom situations to be utilised more in current time practices.

The increasing integration of social media into educational settings has transformed how students and educators interact, collaborate, and share knowledge. Social media platforms such

as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have evolved to offer new possibilities for teaching and learning. These platforms provide students and educators with innovative ways to share knowledge, foster collaboration, and enhance engagement, especially in online and hybrid learning environments (Kumar & Nanda, 2022). Their widespread adoption has made them indispensable in the modern educational landscape.

The problem began to emerge as the double role of social media in education came to light. On the one hand, research has demonstrated its value as a learning tool. Social media enables active learning by offering collaborative spaces, video-based content, and interactive tools that allow students to share ideas, engage in discussions, and access diverse resources in real time (Ansari & Khan, 2020). It also encourages self-directed learning and creativity, making education more inclusive and accessible (Vivakaran & Neelamalar, 2018).

On the other hand, as a distractor, concerns regarding misuse and potential for distraction have been found. Excessive use of social media in educational contexts has been linked to shorter attention spans, procrastination, reduced academic performance, and even mental health issues such as stress and anxiety (Chen & Xiao, 2022). The line between productive educational use and detrimental overuse is often blurred, making it difficult for both educators and students to strike a balance. The COVID-19 pandemic brought these challenges into sharper focus. With the shift to online learning, social media became a primary tool for connecting students with their peers and instructors. While this transition highlighted its potential to bridge gaps in traditional education to shift to social media as a learning tool and potential distractor in the modern educational setting.

Despite the growing reliance on social media in education, there is a lack of comprehensive research addressing its role as a facilitator of learning and a source of distraction. Most studies focus on either its benefits or its challenges, leaving a critical gap in understanding how to maximize its positive impact while mitigating its negative effects. This gap has become increasingly significant as education continues to integrate digital technologies and adapt to the needs of 21st-century learners. Addressing this issue is essential for developing strategies that harness the educational potential of social media while minimizing its risks. This research seeks to analyze this both, providing insights into how educators and institutions can leverage social media effectively while reducing its adverse effects on student focus and learning outcomes.

Objectives:

- 1) To study the students' perception regarding the role of social media as a learning tool in higher education.

- 2) To study the students' perception regarding the role of social media as a potential distractor in higher education.

Methodology:

Research Design

The researcher has adopted a survey method to explore the role of social media in educational settings. This quantitative component has gathered numerical data on students' usage patterns, perceptions, and academic outcomes and overall role of social media as a learning tool and potential distractor in educational settings.

Population and Sample

The target population included postgraduate students of the session 2024-25 from University of Allahabad. Stratified random sampling has been employed to ensure representation across disciplines and genders. A total of 150 participants has been randomly selected for data collection.

Tool Used

For analysis of the data a structured questionnaire has been used to collect the data. Its Cronbach Alpha coefficient was found to be 0.83; which showed a good reliability.

Findings and Discussion

Objective 1: To study the students' perception regarding the role of social media as a learning tool in higher education.

Table 1: Students' perception regarding the role of social media as a learning tool.

Part-A						
Social media as learning tool						
S. No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I use social media to increase knowledge related to my subject.	30%	52.7%	10.7%	5.3%	1.3%
2.	I use social media to share information related to study	24.7%	55.3%	12%	6.7%	1.3%

	activities.					
3.	Social media helps in gathering new information and trends in studies.	31.3%	49.3%	8%	10%	1.3%
4.	Social media provides an opportunity to share my thoughts and knowledge on a global platform.	24%	52%	11.3%	11.3%	1.3%
5.	Social media helps to talk, group discussion, and creative expression of ideas on any platforms for study.	27.3%	45.3%	13.3%	12%	2%
6.	Social media provides me the opportunity to interact and collaborate with other classmates to exchange ideas and knowledge in in-depth study.	28.7%	44%	10%	14%	3.3%
7.	Social media provides me with new ways of learning along with new ways of thinking.	24.7%	44.7%	14%	12.7%	4%
8.	Social media gives me the opportunity to follow subject and academic expertise related to different fields.	24%	47.3%	11.3%	16%	1.3%
9.	I use social media to took guidance from different teachers, students, and experts in various fields.	23.3%	39.3%	18.7%	11.3%	7.3%
10.	I use social media to access educational videos, lectures and attend seminars, conferences and workshops to enhance my knowledge.	32.7%	45.3%	10%	9.3%	2.7%
11.	Social media helps me to do research along with study.	20%	51.3%	12.7%	10.7%	5.3%
12.	I use social media to read study	20.7%	51%	17.3%	6.7%	3.3%

	journals to keep up updated to the latest advancements.					
13.	Social media provides opportunities in online study in different courses.	34%	47.3%	4.7%	12.7%	1.3%
14.	I use social media platforms to create discussion groups on academic topics.	20%	49.3%	14.7%	11.3%	4.7%
15.	I use social media to find courses and other informative materials and share it with friends and classmates.	24.7%	48.7%	14%	9.3%	3.3%
16.	Social media enhances effectiveness and efficiency in classroom situations.	18%	37.3%	19.3%	20%	5.3%
17.	I use social media to stay in touch with teachers, classmates, scholars and experts at national and global platforms.	22%	50%	14.7%	8.7%	4.7%
18.	Social media helps in finding and searching for contents, resources and different materials related to study.	28%	48.7%	10%	10.7%	2.7%

Interpretation

The table shows that 100% acceptance of social media usage in the educational routines of postgraduate students have been found. Above data reveals that 78% are using social media as a learning tool and most of its aspects in higher education students. It is found that most of the students use social media for enhancing their subject knowledge. Only a small percentage (6.6%) of students have been disagreed. A high percentage of students (80%) said that they use social media to share study-related content, while just 8% disagreed, highlighting strong communication utility. Most of the students (80.6%) felt that social media helps them stay connected with academic trends which suggests the role of it as a dynamic, real-time educational resource. 76% of students (24% strongly agree, 52% agree) believe social media allows global sharing of knowledge. Still, 12.6% disagreed on this dimension.

Table shows that 72.6% agreed that social media supports discussion and creativity while 14% were of opposite view. 72.7% of students reported that they use social media for deep collaboration with classmates in opposition to 17.3% of students. 69.4% students were of the opinion that social media fosters innovative learning, while 16.7% expressed disagreement, possibly reflecting varied learning preferences or digital skills. Majority students (71.3%) indicated that they followed experts via social media, while 17.3% have not done this. 62.6% of students have sought expert advice through social media, with a higher neutral rate (18.7%) and 18.6% disagreement.

A high percent (78%) of students used social media for videos, lectures, and events i.e. as learning tool. Just 12% disagreed. 71.3% found social media useful in conducting research, though 16% disagreed—indicating it may support general research but not replace traditional methods. 71.7% of students have used this platform to read journals, while 10% disagreed. A sizable 17.3% were neutral, possibly unsure of or inconsistent in journal usage. A high rate 81.3% agreed that social media offers online course opportunities while 14% were disagreed may be due to ignorance. 69.3% agreed they use platforms to form discussion groups, though 16% disagreed.

The most mixed response was found for use of social media for classroom integration: only 55.3% agreed, while 25.3% disagreed and 19.3% remain neutral, suggesting unclear or limited option regarding it.

Objective 2: To study the students' perception regarding the role of social media as a potential distractor in higher education.

Table 2: Students' perception regarding the role of social media as a potential distractor

Part-B						
Social media as potential distractor						
S. No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19.	Social media distracts students' focus on academic learning.	27.3%	40.7%	16%	13.3%	2.7%
20.	Social media raises privacy issues in educational settings.	14.7%	51.3%	22.7%	8.7%	2.7%
21.	Social media increases the risks of hacking and spam attacks in	26%	51.3%	12.7%	5.3%	4.7%

	educational settings.					
22.	Social media raises vague copyright and intellectual property issues in educational settings.	23.3%	50.7%	16.7%	7.3%	2%
23.	Bombarding of information from different sites can be a barrier to effective social media use in educational settings.	19.3%	46.7%	18.7%	11.3%	4%
24.	Social media can hinder students' capacity to express their feelings and opinions.	16%	34.7%	18.7%	27.3%	3.3%
25.	Social media can lead to improper use of technology in educational settings.	22	36.7%	17.3%	20.7%	3.3%
26.	Social media can be a source of misinformation and disinformation in educational settings.	26%	43.3%	17.3%	8.7%	4.7%
27.	Social media can lead to social isolation and decreased face-to-face interaction among students.	34.7%	40.7%	14.7%	8%	2%
28.	Social media can be a distraction from critical thinking and deep learning in educational settings.	26%	24.7%	22%	23.3%	4%
29.	Social media can lead to decreased attention span among students.	29.3%	38%	16.7%	12.7%	3.3%
30.	Social media can lead to decreased face-to-face communication skills among students.	24%	46.7%	12.7%	12%	4.7%
31.	Social media can be a distraction from physical activity and	29.3%	52.7%	8%	5.3%	4.7%

	outdoor play.					
32.	Social media can lead to decreased creativity and originality among students.	22%	47.3%	13.3%	13.3%	4%
33.	Social media can create a sense of competition and comparison among students.	16.7%	46%	19.3%	13.3%	4.7%
34.	Social media can lead to decreased empathy and compassion among students.	18%	28%	26%	23.3%	4.7%
35.	Social media can lead to decreased self-awareness and self-reflection among students.	17.3%	40%	19.3%	18%	5.3%
36.	Social media can create a sense of isolation and loneliness among students.	22.7%	50%	13.3%	7.3%	6.7%
37.	Social media can lead to decreased critical thinking and media literacy skills.	13.3%	26.7%	24.7%	31.3%	4%
38.	Social media can lead to decreased academic motivation and engagement among students.	13.3%	24%	22.7%	30.7%	9.3%

Interpretation

Data from Table-2 showed that 69% P.G. students see social media as a potential distractor. 27.3% of students strongly agreed and 40.7% agreed that social media distracts their focus from academic learning affecting concentration. 23.3% remained neutral, while 8.7% disagreed. Regarding privacy issues, most of the students 66% agreed that social media raises this issue in educational settings. Risk of hacking and spam was a major concern for most of the students 77.3% while others were neutral or disagreed. This may be because they have negligence attitude for this. Students have also shown great concern for copyright and intellectual property issues. Same was the case with ethical issues (66% were agreed).

Students (50.7%) opined that social media act as a hinder for emotional expression. They said that social media leads to isolation and less face-to-face interaction. They said that it affects their social life. A significant 25.3% were neutral, 15.3% disagreed, and 8.7% strongly disagreed. Regarding improper use of technology, a general agreement has been found among the students. Students have also shown concern for misinformation. 26% strongly agreed and 43.3% agreed that social media spreads misinformation. The distribution for distraction from deep learning reflects mixed experiences, with a sizable portion unconvinced of this negative effect.

A large majority saw attention span as a major drawback while 24% strongly agreed and 46.7% agreed that it reduces real-world communication skills. Most students feel that social media affects interpersonal development. Regarding distraction from physical activities, creativity and originality, limitation in self-expression, unhealthy competition, most of the students showed positive opinion i.e. social media affect these things.

Students were also of the opinion that social media reduces their self-awareness (57.3%), 72.7% students said that it causes isolation and loneliness while 62.7% agreed that it does not have effect on their academic motivation.

Discussion

The first objective was related with the investigation of role of social media as a learning tool and it was found that majority of the students view social media as an effective learning tool. This finding aligns closely with the findings of Trad (2021). Similarly, Al-Rahmi et al. (2015) and Al-Rahmi & Zeki (2017) reported in their research that social media enhances engagement, student satisfaction, and academic performance through collaborative learning. Furthermore, the results regarding learning through social media platforms correspond with the observations of Kumar & Nanda (2024) because they have also highlighted the efficiency of short, dynamic educational experiences facilitated via digital media.

Regarding the distractive potential role of social media, 69% of students in this study reported that social media causes academic distractions like-isolation and loneliness, reduction in self-awareness. This corroborates with studies such as Chen & Xiao (2022) and Agarwal et al. (2021), which identified distraction, procrastination, and emotional disturbances (like anxiety and depression). Issues like reduced face-to-face communication, misinformation, privacy concerns, and emotional isolation highlighted by students are also extensively documented by Perez et al. (2023) and Barry et al. (2017), reinforcing the need for balanced and mindful usage.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the role of social media as a learning tool and a potential distractor in higher education at post-graduate level. The findings demonstrated a nuanced landscape while a significant number of students recognized the educational advantages of social media as a learning tool. Results also showed social media as a distractor whenever students distract or having no proper strategies to utilise different social media platforms. Both the things happened at once but it's up to the students how they can use this, whether in the positive manner or negative manner.

In conclusion we can say that social media's influence on education is complex and multidimensional. It holds considerable promise as a pedagogical tool when leveraged appropriately, but it also demands conscious regulation and institutional guidance to mitigate its distractive potential. Developing digital literacy, promoting time management strategies, and curating purposeful academic content can help in striking a productive balance between its benefits and drawbacks in educational contexts.

We can conclude that social media is neither entirely beneficial nor entirely harmful; Its impact depends critically on how, when, and why it is used by students, and how institutions guide that usage.

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