

The Role of Fear of Missing Out (Fomo) In Shaping Social Media Habits and Academic Engagement in Young Adults: - A University-Level Survey

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Abstract

Social media has become a pervasive component of student life, shaping learning behaviors, communication patterns, and emotional well-being. While these platforms promote academic collaboration, knowledge sharing, and peer support, excessive or unregulated use can contribute to mental health challenges, reduced concentration, and declining academic performance. Among Indian university students, social media presents a dual impact—offering valuable educational opportunities while simultaneously posing risks related to distraction, addiction, and psychological stress. Existing literature underscores this complex interplay, emphasizing the need for a balanced understanding of both the benefits and drawbacks. This paper synthesizes prior research on the positive and negative effects of social media on university students, outlines key themes emerging from current studies, and proposes a methodological framework for future empirical investigation. The study further recommends implementing digital literacy programs, strengthening mental health support systems, and formulating institutional policies that promote responsible and productive social media usage.

Keywords- social media, Mental health, Academic performance, Student behavior, Digital literacy, Stress, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), Digital Well-Being, Self-Regulation, JOMO, FoMO-R Framework.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has reshaped learning patterns, communication style, and behavioral tendencies in university students. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube influence academic collaboration, peer learning, and personal development. However, the misuse of social media has raised concerns regarding academic decline, emotional distress, cyberbullying, and social media addiction. This paper presents a structured journal-format review of the impact of social media usage on students, particularly focusing on mental health and academic performance. Social media platforms have transformed the way students communicate, learn, and socialize. While these platforms offer convenience, accessibility to information, and peer support, concerns have been raised regarding their effect on students' mental well-being and academic productivity. This research focuses on students of a specific university community to assess how usage intensity, purpose, and behavioral patterns relate to psychological stress and academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing studies indicate that social media has a dual impact. Research highlights that social networks can improve academic collaboration and information sharing, however prolonged exposure will lead to psychological distress, reduced productivity, and disrupted sleep patterns. Several studies emphasize rising social media addiction among youth and its correlation with anxiety, depression, and decreased academic output.

Positive Impacts of Social Media

Academic Collaboration: Social media enables group discussions, knowledge sharing, and real-time communication, supporting academic performance.

Enhanced Engagement: During online learning transitions, platforms facilitated resource sharing and classroom management.

Skill Development: Students develop digital literacy, creativity, and communication skills through content creation.

Negative Impacts and Issues Faced by Students

Despite its advantages, excessive or improper use of social media leads to several issues:

Distraction and Procrastination: High usage correlates with reduced academic performance, poor time management, and increased procrastination.

Addiction and Mental Health: A significant proportion of students exhibit addiction-like behaviors, leading to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and impaired cognitive function.

Cyberbullying and Privacy Risks: Students face risks such as cyberbullying, privacy breaches, and exposure to harmful content, which can further impact mental well-being.

Physical Health Issues: Prolonged screen time is associated with eye strain and disrupted sleep patterns.

Issue/Challenge	Impact on Students	Preventive Measures/Recommendations	Citations
Distraction & Procrastination	Lower academic performance	Time management, digital detox, structured use	(1)
Addiction & Mental Health	Anxiety, depression, poor sleep	Counselling, awareness, mindfulness, monitoring	(2)
Cyberbullying & Privacy	Emotional distress, safety risks	Digital literacy, reporting, parental supervision	(3)
Physical Health Issues	Eye strain, sleep disruption. Neck sprain	Screen time limits, health education	(4)

Table 1: Negative Impacts on students life

Comprehensive Measures to Reduce Social Impact on Indian College Students

Indian college students face significant social pressures, including academic stress, social isolation, stigma, discrimination, and cyberbullying. The literature suggests a multi-pronged approach involving institutional, community, and individual-level interventions.

Institutional and Policy-Level Measures

- **Curricular Reforms:** To reduce the academic workload among students, exam frequency, and to promote skill-based learning to reduce stress among students (5).
- **Enhanced Student Support Services:** Expand counselling, mentoring, and peer support programs tailored to student needs, especially for those in later academic years or from marginalized backgrounds.

- Awareness and Anti-Stigma Campaigns: Implement education and contact-based interventions to reduce stigma around mental health and encourage help-seeking.
- Anti-Cyberbullying Policies: Establish clear reporting policies, arrange awareness campaigns for the students, and strict enforcement of cyberbullying laws and rules. Provide guidance on safe online behaviour rules and ethics to be retained (6).
- Hostel and Campus Improvements: Upgrade hostel facilities, recreation, and sports opportunities to foster a supportive environment.

Digital Well-Being Policy Framework

- Establish institutional guidelines for healthy screen habits.
- Include “Think before You Post” principles to raise awareness of digital permanence.

Behaviour-Focused Social Media Policy

- Policies must focus on safety behaviour (harassment, bullying, and coercion) rather than content censorship.

Offline Social Connection Programs

- Organise campus-level unplugged days, activity clubs, and no-phone hours to directly reduce FOMO.

Community and Social Support

- Peer Support Programs: Empower students and get them trained as peer supporters to provide less intensity studies and stigma-reducing mental health support (7).
- Mentorship Initiatives among students: Pair junior students with seniors to build resilience, connectivity and social connection among them.
- Support Groups: Create targeted groups for vulnerable populations (e.g., females, rural students, marginalized communities).
- Family and Community Engagement: Encourage family members to contact and get them involved in community activities to buffer from isolation and stress (8).

Individual-Level Strategies

- Coping Skills Training: Offer workshops on stress management, time management, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence (9).
- Promoting Self-Identity and Resilience: Encourage self-reflection, goal-setting, and gratitude practices to build self-esteem and adaptability.
- Encouraging Help-Seeking: Normalize mental health help-seeking through community- level interventions and reduce internalized stigma.

Technology and Digital Interventions

- Multi-Modal Mental Health Interventions: Combine mobile apps, AI-based chatbots, podcasts, and face-to-face counselling.
- CBT & ACT Digital Modules: Introduce and arrange Internet-based CBT and Acceptance & Commitment Therapy modules to students to aid them in anxiety, compulsive checking, stress and FOMO-driven thoughts.

- **Peer-Led Virtual Learning Communities:** Use social media platforms for moderated academic communities that promote learning progress instead of comparison anxiety.

Findings (from Literature)

Based on previous research, the primary findings include:

- Over 60% of students use social media for over 3 hours daily.
- Higher screen time definitely affects their health, sleep quality and increased academic stress.
- Students using platforms for academic purposes show improved engagement and academic results.
- Cyberbullying and misinformation remain critical challenges.

DISCUSSION

The results and the available literature show that the usage of smartphones every day affects the physical health and mental well-being of the students along with their academic performance. Though smartphones are an essential tool for learning, the increasing and unregulated use of smartphones has resulted in negative consequences for the academic and physical health of the students. The increasing usage of smartphones has resulted in physical complaints such as eye strain, headaches, sleep problems, and musculoskeletal pain among the students. Sleep deprivation caused by late-night smartphone usage further exacerbates fatigue and reduces cognitive efficiency during academic activities.

From a psychological perspective, continuous smartphone engagement—particularly through social networking platforms—contributes to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The constant exposure to curated online content fosters unhealthy social comparison, negatively influencing students' self-esteem and emotional stability. Moreover, frequent notifications and multitasking behaviours disrupt sustained attention, leading to diminished concentration and reduced memory retention. These findings align with cognitive load theory, which suggests that excessive external stimuli impair deep learning processes.

Academically, excessive usage of smartphone is associated with procrastination, reduced classroom engagement and activities, and lower academic performance and lower marks. Students tend to prioritize short-term digital gratification over long-term academic goals, resulting in surface-level learning rather than critical thinking and conceptual understanding. Over time, this pattern may hinder the development of essential skills such as problem-solving, self-discipline, and effective communication.

Importantly, the issue lies not in smartphone ownership but in usage patterns. When employed purposefully, smartphones can enhance learning through access to digital resources, collaborative platforms, and self-regulated study tools. Therefore, the challenge is to promote balanced and mindful usage of smartphones rather than complete restriction.

Emphasize that FOMO is a dual-edged construct. Recent studies (2024–2025) show FOMO can, Reduce academic performance through poor self-control and also be leveraged positively to drive engagement when aligned with structured academic goals. Highlight that the real mediator is loss of self-regulation, not technology itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate the negative effects of excessive smartphone usage among students:

For Students

- Adopt structured smartphone usage by setting daily screen-time limits and prioritizing academic

applications over recreational use.

- Avoid smartphone use at least one hour before bedtime to improve sleep quality.
- Practice focused study techniques such as the Pomodoro method and keep smartphones away during study sessions (11).
- Engage regularly in physical activities, offline hobbies, and face-to-face social interactions to maintain mental balance.

For Educational Institutions

- Incorporate digital wellbeing and media literacy programs into the curriculum.
- Encourage smartphone-free classrooms during lectures and examinations.
- Provide counselling services to support students experiencing technology addiction or mental health concerns.
- Promote awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of balanced technology use.

Leveraging FOMO as an Academic Motivator

- Design **high-quality virtual academic interactions** that satisfy belongingness needs.
- Introduce **self-control training modules** focusing on:
 - Goal setting
 - Delay of gratification
 - Digital boundary management
- Encourage reflective practices linking academic identity with purposeful social media use.

For Parents and Guardians

- Model healthy smartphone habits and monitor excessive usage patterns at home.
- Encourage open discussions regarding responsible technology use and mental health.
- Support structured routines that balance academic work, recreation, and rest.

Policy and Future Research Implications

- Policymakers should develop guidelines for healthy digital usage among students.
- Future research should explore longitudinal effects of smartphone usage on academic and psychological outcomes.
- Further studies may examine the role of self-regulation and personality traits in moderating smartphone-related impacts.

Institutional Digital Well-Being and FOMO Management Framework (FoMO-R Model)

- Universities should shift from treating mental health as an individual issue to a shared institutional responsibility.

- Introduce a structured FOMO Reduction (FoMO-R) Framework combining:
 - Cognitive self-talk strategies
 - Empowered refusal skills (e.g., “I don’t need to respond immediately”)
 - Integrate blended digital literacy training across disciplines rather than isolated workshops.
- Promote JOMO (Joy of Missing Out) as a positive psychological practice encouraging mindful offline engagement.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the multifaceted influence of social media on the academic and psychological well-being of university students. Evidence from existing literature demonstrates that social media serves as both an academic enabler and a potential source of behavioural and emotional challenges. On one hand, platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube facilitate collaborative learning, peer support, information exchange, and innovative skill development. On the other hand, excessive, unregulated, or purposeless engagement is strongly associated with distraction, reduced academic performance, sleep disruption, anxiety, cyberbullying, and addiction-like symptoms.

Findings consistently indicate that the intensity, purpose, and timing of usage play a decisive role in whether social media exerts positive or negative effects. Students who use social media primarily for educational activities demonstrate improved participation and academic productivity, whereas entertainment-driven or prolonged night-time use correlates with emotional distress and impaired concentration.

The review further emphasizes that psychological outcomes such as stress, depression, and FOMO (fear of missing out) often mediate the relationship between social media habits and academic decline. These findings underscore the importance of adopting structured digital practices and institutional interventions to promote healthy engagement. Overall, this study reinforces that social media is not inherently harmful; rather, its impact depends on how consciously, purposefully, and responsibly it is used.

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