

# Patterns, Perceptions and Educational Impacts of Social Media Use among Secondary School Students in Liberia

Isaac Gbadeh Jolokleh., Edwin B. Arzoaquoi

Department of Secondary Education, William V.S. Tubman College of Education, University of Liberia

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the growing integration of social media into students' daily lives, there remains a paucity of empirical research on its academic implications within the Liberian educational sector. This study examined the relationship between social media use and students' academic performance among secondary school students in Liberia. The study was grounded in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory and employed a descriptive survey research design. The target population comprised secondary school students, from which a sample of 229 respondents was selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected through a self-constructed questionnaire and analyzed using both descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, specifically the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, with the aid of SPSS. The findings revealed that students extensively use social media platforms for communication and learning-related activities; however, excessive usage was associated with adverse academic outcomes. The analysis established a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between time spent on social media and academic performance ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that increased engagement with social media corresponds with reduced academic effectiveness. The study is significant as it provides empirical evidence to guide educational policy and practice in Liberia. It emphasizes the need for structured integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning, alongside strategies to regulate and optimize students' use of social media for academic purposes.

**Keywords:** Social media, secondary school students, educational impact, Liberia, digital learning

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has transformed communication, interaction, and learning across the globe. Social media platforms are defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct public or semi-public profiles and articulate a list of users with whom they share connections" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors, attitudes, and skills through observing others within a social context (Bandura, 1977). Bandura emphasizes that learning occurs through processes such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, making social environments critical for knowledge acquisition.

In the context of social media, these principles are highly relevant. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp provide environments where students observe peers, imitate behaviors, and engage in shared learning experiences. As Bandura (1977) notes, "most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling," a process that is amplified in digital environments.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0," enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content. This highlights the interactive and participatory nature of social media, making it particularly appealing to young learners.

In developing countries like Liberia, where access to traditional educational resources may be limited, social media presents both opportunities and challenges for learners. According to UNESCO (2021), digital technologies, including social media, have the potential to "transform education in Africa by expanding access

to learning resources and supporting flexible learning environments.” However, Bandura (1986) also warns that observational learning can lead to both positive and negative behaviors depending on the models being observed.

Social media has been recognized as a tool that enhances collaboration, communication, and access to information. Kietzmann et al. (2011) further explain that social media platforms function through key elements such as sharing, conversations, and relationships, which are essential for collaborative learning. However, excessive use may lead to distractions, reduced academic focus, and behavioral concerns such as addiction and cyberbullying.

Junco (2012) found that the frequency of Facebook use is significantly related to student engagement, noting that “time spent on social media can both positively and negatively influence academic involvement depending on how it is used.” Secondary school students, in particular, are highly vulnerable to both the benefits and risks associated with social media usage.

Despite its widespread use, there is limited empirical research in Liberia examining how secondary school students use social media, their perceptions of it, and its actual impact on their academic performance. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by investigating patterns, perceptions, and educational implications of social media use among secondary school students.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine patterns of social media use among secondary school students in Liberia.
2. To assess students’ perceptions of social media use.
3. To determine the educational impact of social media on students’ academic activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study employed a descriptive survey design to gather quantitative data on students’ use and perceptions of social media. The design is appropriate as it allows for the examination of observable behaviors and attitudes, consistent with Bandura’s (1977) emphasis on observable learning within social contexts.

### **Population and Sampling**

The study targeted secondary school students from two selected schools in Liberia. A total of **229 students** participated in the study. Simple random sampling was used to ensure equal participation.

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

A **20-item structured questionnaire** was used to collect data. The instrument covered: Social media usage patterns, perceptions of social media and educational impact.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Content validity was ensured through expert review. The instrument was considered appropriate for measuring the intended variables.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were prepared, coded, and organized for analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages were employed to summarize and describe the characteristics of the sample, including patterns of social media usage among students. In addition, inferential statistics were utilized to test the study hypothesis. Specifically, the Pearson Product-Moment

Correlation Coefficient (r) was applied to examine the relationship between time spent on social media and students’ academic performance. The null hypothesis tested was that there is no significant relationship between social media use and students’ academic performance. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

**Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their responses were treated confidentially. Participation was voluntary.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In terms of perception, 70% of respondents agreed that social media makes life easier, while 66% believed that platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom enhance academic work.

However, despite these benefits, students identified major challenges including time consumption (44%), laziness (31%), and cyberbullying (17%).

**1. Patterns of Social Media Use**

Findings revealed that almost all respondents use social media, indicating its widespread adoption among students. This aligns with Boyd and Ellison (2007), who noted that social networking sites have become integral to everyday social interaction, especially among young people. Most students use between 1–5 social media platforms. A smaller proportion use 6–10 or more platforms. The most frequently used platforms are: Facebook and WhatsApp.

From a Social Learning Theory perspective, this high usage suggests that students are continuously exposed to peer behaviors and digital models, which influence their own actions. Bandura (1977) explains that individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors they observe frequently, especially when such behaviors appear rewarding.

Descriptive statistics revealed that 98% of the respondents reported using social media, indicating a high level of digital engagement. The majority (74%) used between one and five platforms, with Facebook (61%) emerging as the most frequently used platform.

Junco (2012) supports this finding, emphasizing that Facebook remains one of the most widely used platforms among students and plays a central role in their daily engagement patterns.

Regarding time spent, 66% of respondents reported spending 1–3 hours daily on social media, while 12% spent more than seven hours. This suggests that while moderate use is common, a portion of students may be at risk of excessive use.

These findings confirm that social media is deeply embedded in students’ daily routines, supporting UNESCO’s (2021) assertion that digital technologies are increasingly shaping learning behaviors in Africa.

Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicate the pattern, time spent revealing the frequencies and percentages below:

Table 1: Social Media Usage (Yes/No)

Response	Frequency (Approx.)	Percentage (%)
Yes	225	98%
No	4	2%
<b>Total</b>	229	100%

**Interpretation:** Almost all respondents use social media, confirming its widespread adoption.

Table 2: Number of Social Media Platforms Used

Number of Platforms	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1-5	170	74%
6-9	30	13%
10+	29	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3: Most Used Social Media Platform

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook	140	61%
WhatsApp	60	26%
Others	29	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Interpretation:** Facebook is the dominant platform among students.

Table 4: Daily Time Spent on Social Media

Time (Hours)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1-3 hours	150	66%
4-6 hours	50	22%
7+ hours	29	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 2. Students' Perceptions of Social Media

The generally positive perception of social media among students aligns strongly with Bandura's concept of vicarious reinforcement, where individuals adopt behaviors after observing others being rewarded (Bandura, 1977). Most agreed that social media makes life easier, consistent with Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who highlight the convenience and accessibility provided by social media platforms.

Furthermore, 66% of respondents believed that platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom enhance academic work. This supports UNESCO (2021), which states that digital platforms facilitate "flexible, accessible, and learner-centered education."

However, the mixed perceptions observed in this study also reflect Bandura's assertion that learning is influenced by both positive and negative models. Exposure to misuse, such as excessive entertainment or harmful content, may shape negative attitudes toward social media use (Bandura, 1986).

Students also acknowledged that social media improves communication skills and supports academic group work. Kietzmann et al. (2011) emphasize that social media enables interaction and relationship-building, which are critical for collaborative learning.

Conversely, perceptions were not entirely positive. Some students believed that social media should be restricted or banned, particularly entertainment-focused platforms. This reflects concerns raised by Junco (2012), who noted that excessive or non-academic use of social media may reduce students’ academic focus. Table 5 reveals the frequencies and percentages below:

Table 5: Perception – Social Media Makes Life Easier

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Agree	160	70%
Somewhat Agree	50	22%
Disagree/Neutral	19	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>100%</b>

### 3. Educational Impact of Social Media

#### Positive Impacts

The positive educational impacts identified—such as online classes, communication, and group work—can be explained through Bandura’s concept of observational learning. Students learn academic skills and behaviors by observing peers and teachers interacting on digital platforms.

Bandura (1977) states that learning occurs when individuals “observe modeled behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors.” In this case, students observing effective academic use of platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom are likely to replicate such behaviors.

Students identified several academic benefits: Facilitation of online classes, Enhanced communication with peers and teachers, Support for group discussions and collaboration, and increased access to learning materials. Most respondents agreed that: Social media provides useful platforms for academic group work and it helps develop communication skills. These findings align with UNESCO (2021), which notes that digital tools “expand access to knowledge and support continuous learning beyond the classroom.

#### Negative Impacts

The negative effects identified—time consumption, laziness, and cyberbullying—also align with Social Learning Theory. Bandura (1986) emphasizes that individuals may imitate undesirable behaviors if such behaviors are frequently observed or appear socially accepted.

Despite its benefits, several drawbacks were identified: Time consumption (most common concern), Laziness and distraction and Cyberbullying. These factors may negatively affect academic performance. Junco (2012) similarly observed that excessive time spent on social media can negatively affect academic engagement, particularly when it replaces study time.

#### Effect on Academic Performance

Students expressed mixed opinions regarding the effect of social media on academic performance. While some believed it enhances learning, others were uncertain or disagreed. This supports the argument by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) that social media’s impact depends largely on how users engage with it—whether for productive

or non-productive purposes. The mixed responses regarding academic performance further support Bandura’s position that learning outcomes depend on environmental influences and individual choices (Bandura, 1977).

Table 6: Educational Impact – Social Media Improves Academic Work (Zoom, Google Classroom)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Agree	150	66%
Somewhat Agree	40	17%
Disagree	39	17%
<b>Total</b>	229	100%

Table 7: Perceived Advantages of Social Media

Advantage	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Communication	90	39%
Online Classes	60	26%
Remote Working	20	9%
Others	59	26%
<b>Total</b>	229	100%

Table 8: Perceived Disadvantages of Social Media

Disadvantage	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Time Consuming	100	44%
Laziness	70	31%
Cyberbullying	40	17%
Others	19	8%
<b>Total</b>	229	100%

### Hypothesis Testing

The following null hypothesis was tested to determine whether there was any significant relationship between social media use and students’ academic performance:

Ho: Social media use and students’ academic performance are not significantly correlated.

Bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between time spent on social media and perceived academic improvement among students. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used, and the results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Pearson Correlation Analysis of Social Media Use and Academic Performance

Variables	Pearson r	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Social Media Use and Academic Performance	-0.36	0.01	229

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The analysis revealed a moderate negative and statistically significant relationship between social media use and students’ academic performance ( $r(229) = -0.36, p < .05$ ), as shown in Table 9. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that increased time spent on social media is associated with a decrease in students’ academic performance. The results suggest that while social media may offer academic benefits, excessive usage negatively influences students’ academic engagement and outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, concludes that social media serves as a powerful social environment where students learn through observation, interaction, and imitation. Consistent with Bandura (1977). The study revealed a moderate negative and statistically significant relationship between social media use and students’ academic performance ( $r(229) = -0.36, p < .05$ ), indicating that increased time spent on social media is associated with decreased academic effectiveness. This suggests that although social media has the potential to support learning, its impact is largely dependent on the pattern and purpose of usage. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that students’ behaviors and academic experiences are shaped by the models they encounter on social media. While students generally perceive social media as beneficial—particularly for communication and collaborative learning—there are notable concerns regarding its misuse and negative effects such as time wastage and distraction. Consistent with Junco (2012) and UNESCO (2021), the findings also suggest that social media’s educational impact is not inherently positive or negative but is therefore dual in nature, offering both opportunities and challenges. It depends on the manner and purpose of its use.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Structured Integration Schools should integrate social media into teaching in a guided and structured manner.
2. Digital Literacy Training Students should be educated on responsible and productive use of social media.
3. Teacher Involvement Teachers should leverage platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook for academic engagement, while maintaining professional boundaries.
4. Monitoring and Regulation Schools and parents should monitor students’ usage to reduce excessive and harmful use.
5. Policy Development Educational authorities in Liberia should develop policies guiding the academic use of social media.

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