SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS AND ACADEMIC DISTRACTIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines how social media supports university learning and how it can interfere with students' academic work. A narrative discussion of selected studies distinguishes purposeful academic use from recreational use during study. Social media can expand access to instructional materials, provide opportunities for authentic language practice, and facilitate peer collaboration and professional networking. Its academic value depends on how students evaluate, apply, and discuss the content they encounter. Studies also identify associations between some patterns of use and lower academic performance, frequent task switching, unfavorable social comparison, and sleep disturbance. These findings vary across activities and research designs. The paper argues that universities can support productive use through clearly defined learning tasks, while students can protect their attention through notification control, planned access, and regular evaluation of their study habits.

Keywords: social media, higher education, digital literacy, academic performance, media multitasking, language learning, self-regulation.

Introduction

Social networking sites allow users to maintain profiles, connect with others, and navigate networks of relationships [1]. In higher education, social platforms have overlapping functions. A student may use the same application to clarify an assignment, watch an instructional video, and browse unrelated entertainment. Because these activities serve different purposes, total screen time provides only a partial account of how social media relates to learning.

The central question is how students can use social media for learning while managing the interruptions and social pressures that accompany it. This paper argues that purposeful use can extend access to learning resources and opportunities for collaboration, while frequent interruptions during demanding academic tasks can make sustained study harder. The analysis considers what students do online, when they do it, and how the activity connects to their academic goals.

Approach and Scope

This paper presents a narrative review of selected studies on university teaching, academic performance, media multitasking, social comparison, and sleep. It compares evidence from surveys, naturalistic observation, and laboratory tasks. Surveys can identify associations, observations can document behavior in study settings, and experiments can test narrowly defined effects. Much of the evidence concerns Facebook or earlier media environments, so its findings are most useful for considering comparable behaviors, such as switching between a reading task and a social feed. Platform-specific conclusions about TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube would require direct evidence about those platforms.

Educational and Professional Benefits

Social media gives university students access to explanations, demonstrations, and communities outside class hours. Manca and Ranieri's survey of Italian university teaching staff documented educational uses alongside barriers to adoption [4]. This evidence describes how instructors use these tools and what affects adoption. A

practical question for teachers is whether a platform helps students produce work that demonstrates learning. For instance, students might compare an online explanation with a textbook chapter and submit a brief evaluation of which claims each source supports.

For foreign language students, public interviews, instructional videos, and discussion threads offer examples of vocabulary, pronunciation, and register in context. A structured task might ask students to compare how two English-speaking presenters introduce the same topic, identify differences in formality, and record a short response using expressions appropriate to a particular audience. A transcript or an institutionally accessible copy can support students who have limited internet access or prefer to avoid personal accounts.

Class groups can also support peer feedback and coordination. In a group writing task, each member could share a draft paragraph, comment on a peer's use of evidence, and explain how the feedback informed a revision. Beyond coursework, students can curate a professional portfolio, follow discussions in their field, or share a project with a relevant audience. These activities require attention to authorship, permissions, privacy, and the reliability of information circulated online.

Distraction and Academic Performance

Media multitasking often involves switching between activities such as reading a chapter and checking messages. When students return to the chapter, they may have to recover their place and reconstruct the argument they were following. Rosen et al. observed study behavior in students' homes and documented shifts between academic work and media-related activities [6]. Ophir et al. reported differences in some cognitive-control tasks between heavier and lighter media multitaskers [5]. Later replications and a meta-analysis found weaker and less consistent evidence of distractibility differences [9]. Together, these studies support careful attention to the conditions under which switching occurs.

Research on Facebook use illustrates why measurement matters. Junco examined several indicators of use in relation to academic performance [2]. Kirschner and Karpinski also reported differences in grades and study time between Facebook users and nonusers in their sample [3]. These associations leave open other explanations, including prior achievement, study habits, and competing demands on students' time. An academic discussion group and repeated checking of an entertainment feed are distinct activities even when they occur on the same platform.

Time displacement offers one explanation for how recreational use could affect study. A student who spends part of a planned revision session scrolling may have less time left for retrieval practice, feedback, or revising errors. This explanation is especially relevant when online activity interrupts work with a deadline or a demanding task, such as analyzing a source or constructing a written argument.

Social Comparison, Sleep, and Student Well-Being

Social feeds can expose students to carefully selected accounts of other people's achievements, appearance, or social lives. Vogel et al. linked more frequent Facebook use and upward social comparison with lower trait self-esteem in one study. In a separate experiment, brief exposure to profiles that prompted upward comparisons was associated with lower immediate self-evaluations than exposure to profiles that prompted downward comparisons [7]. In an academic setting, a student who sees classmates' published achievements may compare those selected outcomes with their own unfinished work. The findings concern self-esteem and self-evaluation, which are distinct from a clinical diagnosis.

Levenson et al. reported an association between social media use and sleep disturbance in young adults [8]. The direction of the relationship remains open because students who are already having trouble sleeping may also spend more time online. For university students, the relevant question is whether evening use fits their intended bedtime and next-day commitments. The social consequences likewise depend on how

time is spent. A group chat may help classmates arrange an in-person discussion, while browsing during the meeting can compete with that discussion.

Strategies for Purposeful Use

Students can define a specific goal before opening an application, such as finding two credible explanations of a concept or responding to a peer's draft. A stopping rule can keep the session tied to the task. During reading, writing, or exam preparation, students can mute nonessential notifications and reserve messages for scheduled breaks. A one-week study log can track unplanned checks, completed tasks, and the time available for uninterrupted work. The most informative measure is whether students complete the work and understand it.

Instructors can specify the learning objective, expected output, and criteria for evaluating online materials. For example, a short video assignment can require students to identify the creator, check a claim against a course source, and explain how the video's format affects what it communicates. An equivalent submission through the university's learning platform can keep participation accessible. Assessing the quality of analysis and feedback directs students' attention to learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Social media can extend learning beyond the classroom when students use it to locate credible materials, practice a language, exchange feedback, or build a portfolio. Its main academic risks arise when recreational use interrupts demanding tasks or displaces planned study. The evidence also points to associations with social comparison and sleep disturbance, with conclusions shaped by the methods and populations studied. Universities can help students make productive choices by designing assignments with clear outputs and teaching students to evaluate sources and manage interruptions. Students can assess the value of their own use by asking what it contributed to the work they intended to complete.

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