VOLUME 01 | ISSUE 09
SEPTEMBER 2026

MULTIDISCIPLINARY • PEER-REVIEWED
OPEN ACCESS • PAGES 41–44

SRJ: International Journal of Scientific Research
ISSN(O): 3139-8758

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Article DOI: 10.68295/SRJ/OCDF5266
Article URL: https://doi.org/10.68295/SRJ/OCDF5266

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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MANUSCRIPT INFO

Received: 26 July 2026
Revised: 22 Aug 2026
Final Accepted: 13 Sep 2026
Published: 15 Sep 2026

KEYWORDS

social media; university students; academic engagement; digital learning; self-regulation; higher education

ABSTRACT

Social media has become an integral part of university students' everyday lives, influencing how they communicate, access information, exchange ideas, and participate in academic activities. The growing use of digital platforms in higher education has generated considerable interest in understanding their relationship with academic engagement and learning experiences. Although social media provides opportunities for collaboration, peer interaction, and the rapid sharing of educational resources, its influence on students' academic activities remains complex. While purposeful use may support communication, knowledge sharing, and participation in learning communities, excessive or unstructured use may contribute to distraction, interrupted concentration, and difficulties in managing study time. This article presents a conceptual review of the relationship between social media use and academic engagement among university students. It examines major themes concerning the educational benefits of social networking platforms, the challenges associated with digital distraction, and the role of self-regulation in shaping students' learning experiences. The discussion distinguishes academic use from recreational use and emphasises the importance of considering the purpose, frequency, and context of online activities rather than treating social media use as a single, uniform behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Digital platforms have changed how university students communicate, exchange information, and maintain social relationships. Students may use social media to coordinate group assignments, ask classmates questions, follow academic organisations, or share learning materials. The same platforms also offer entertainment and a constant stream of notifications that can compete with study tasks. Their educational significance therefore cannot be understood simply by counting time spent online.

Research has reported mixed associations between social networking and academic outcomes. Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) examined Facebook use in relation to academic performance, while Junco (2012) explored relationships between Facebook activity and student engagement. Ahn (2011) emphasised that social network sites operate within wider social and educational contexts. Together, this work supports a distinction between different purposes of use rather than treating all social media activity as equivalent.

This article offers a conceptual review of social media use and academic engagement among university students. It is not a systematic review and does not present new empirical findings. Its purpose is to organise key themes, propose a framework, and identify questions for future research.

2. Review Approach and Scope

The article uses a narrative, concept-focused approach, drawing on established scholarship addressing social networking, academic performance, student participation, and digital learning. It does not claim exhaustive coverage, apply formal screening criteria, or pool effect sizes. The focus is on university students and learning-related behaviours such as participation, persistence, attention, collaboration, and access to course information. The framework should be read as a set of propositions informed by prior scholarship, not as a validated model.

3. Social Media as a Learning Resource

Social platforms can reduce practical barriers to peer communication. Students may use group chats to clarify instructions, share links to readings, arrange meetings, or explain concepts in accessible language. These exchanges can extend learning beyond scheduled class time and may help students maintain a sense of belonging within a course community.

Access to information, however, is not the same as learning. Shared material may be inaccurate, poorly contextualised, or unrelated to course objectives. Peer discussion is more likely to support learning when students evaluate sources, explain ideas rather than merely forward them, and connect online exchanges to formal course content. Instructors can encourage these practices by defining clear purposes for online collaboration.

4. Distraction, Multitasking, and Self-Regulation

Potential risks are often linked to interruption and divided attention. Notifications can prompt students to move between coursework and unrelated conversations, while expectations of constant availability may make sustained study more difficult. Broad measures such as daily screen time may obscure differences between purposeful academic communication and habitual checking.

Self-regulation is therefore an important concept. Students differ in their ability to plan study sessions, manage interruptions, and maintain attention toward longer-term goals. Platform design and social expectations also matter, so the issue should not be framed solely as an individual failure of discipline. Practical strategies include disabling non-essential notifications during focused work and separating academic groups from recreational feeds.

5. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a proposed relationship among patterns of social media use, learning-related processes, and academic engagement. Purpose, duration, platform features, and learning context are distinct aspects of use. Peer support and information sharing may connect use to participation and persistence, whereas interruption and information overload may weaken concentration. These pathways can coexist for the same student.

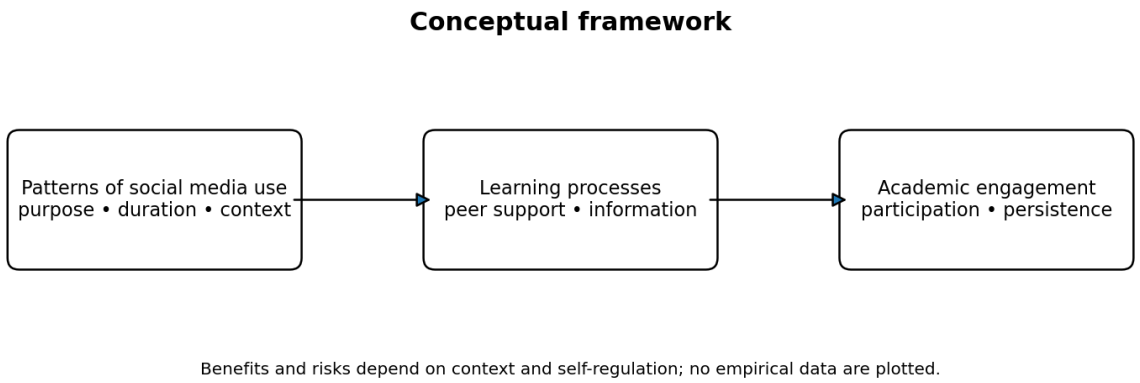


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking social media use with academic engagement.

6. Two Possible Pathways

Figure 2 distinguishes learning-supportive use from disruptive use. In the first pathway, students use a platform to exchange explanations, coordinate tasks, or find relevant resources. In the second, repeated notifications and unrelated content lead to attention shifts that fragment study time. The pathways are not mutually exclusive: a student may benefit from an academic group while also experiencing distraction from the same application.

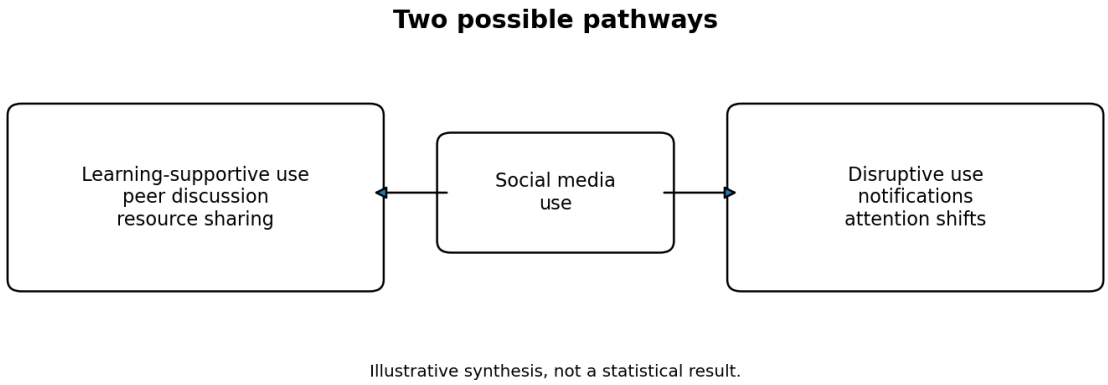


Figure 2. Learning-supportive and disruptive pathways.

Future studies should measure purpose and context rather than treating all social media use as equivalent. Academic engagement should also be distinguished from academic achievement. Engagement includes participation, persistence, and task completion; grades are more distal outcomes influenced by prior knowledge, assessment design, workload, and other factors.

7. Implications for Universities and Educators

Universities should avoid assuming that social media is inherently beneficial or harmful. Instructors can design purposeful online activities with defined learning outcomes, clear participation expectations, and guidance on evaluating information. When platforms are used for course communication, students should know which channels are official, how quickly responses are expected, and where essential announcements will be posted.

Student guidance can focus on practical digital study habits: scheduling focus periods, managing notifications, checking sources before sharing material, and distinguishing collaboration from passive scrolling. Institutions should also consider access, privacy, and inclusion. Students do not all have the same devices, connectivity, study environments, or comfort with public online participation.

8. Directions for Future Research

Future research should measure different forms of use separately, including academic communication, passive browsing, entertainment, and course-directed activities. Self-reported duration alone may be imprecise; studies could combine surveys with activity diaries, interviews, or carefully governed usage records. Researchers should clearly define academic engagement and distinguish it from grades or perceived learning.

Longitudinal and mixed-method designs may help establish whether patterns of use precede changes in engagement, while interviews can explain why the same platform is experienced differently. Figure 3 summarises a practical research agenda.

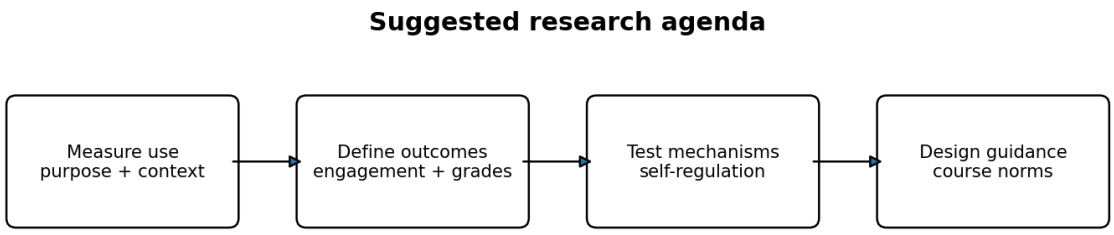


Figure 3. Suggested sequence for future research.

9. Conclusion

Social media is best understood as a set of communication environments whose educational consequences depend on use, context, and self-regulation. It can help students coordinate learning and access peer support, but it can also interrupt attention and create information overload. The framework emphasises the need to distinguish learning-related activity from general use and to examine engagement as an outcome in its own right. Research and educational practice should focus on the conditions under which digital communication supports learning.

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