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Connected, Compared, and Career-Ready: The Impact of Social Media on Graduates' Well-Being, Academic Outcomes, and Employability

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Abstract

Social media has become an important part of the life of graduates at the academic, personal, and professional level as these platforms help in communication, acquiring information, collaborative learning, networking, and building one's profile. But excessive usage or problematic usage of social media can be associated with anxiety, depression, lack of sleep, learning exhaustion, procrastination, distraction, and poor academic performance. The present paper critically reviews the literature on the influence of social media on graduates focusing on mental health, sleep quality, academic performance, digital literacy, professional identity, and employability. The literature review presented here takes a nuanced perspective as social media does not have good or bad effects per se; rather, the effects of social media depend on the purpose of using it, the extent to which it is used, the timing of using it, and many more factors. According to the findings from recent meta-analysis, there is a small but statistically significant negative relationship between technology-related behaviors including social media use and academic performance (Kuş, 2025; Ma et al., 2025). The paper maintains that higher education institutions need to go past the simplistic approach of limiting screen time and instead adopt programs that improve digital well-being, mindfulness, sleep hygiene, professional online identities, and social media career strategy.

***Keywords**: Social Media, Graduates, Graduate Students, Academic Performance, Mental Health, Employability, Digital Literacy, Linkedin, Sleep Quality.*

Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate, learn, build identity and progress in their careers. For graduates and graduate students, social media websites are not only places of recreation but increasingly serve as resources for sharing academic information, engaging with professional ([33]; [15]; [17]; [16], et al. 2023; Brito-Costa et al., 2022)

networks, working with peers, searching for internships and employment, creating portfolios and maintaining personal relations. On the other hand, the presence of social media on smartphones at any moment has brought up questions about excessive use of social media, distraction, disruptions of sleep, psychological issues and disengagement with academic life.

Thus, the role of social media in the life of graduates is quite complicated. It cannot be said whether the use of social media is helpful or harmful. The consequences of social media depend on its form of use. A graduate who utilizes LinkedIn to reach out to alumni, watch job listings, show their projects and join in discussion within the industry will face another situation than a student who indulges in repetitive evening entertainment and comparing himself/herself with idealized images on the Internet.

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This problem has relevance to graduates due to the unique stress they experience. These include writing a dissertation, studying for exams, job hunting, professional identity formation, and transition from university to work. Social media can help with all that through giving access to information and contacts. However, social media can become an addiction and form a feedback loop where anxiety, fear of missing out, lack of sleep, procrastination, and poor academic attention support each other.

Salari et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis including 51 articles on 35,520 university students and estimated the overall prevalence of social media addiction as 18.4%. Prevalence rates were greater in Asian studies (22.8%), although differences were stressed across studies and measures used.[18][22]

Likewise, Kuş (2025) reviewed 63 articles based on 124,166 students from 28 different countries and found a statistically significant negative relationship between technology-based behavior such as smartphone addiction, social media, and video games use and academic performance.

According to the findings of the systematic review carried out by Masalimova et al. (2023) based on 22 peer-reviewed publications, there are both positive and negative results in the scientific research of social networking sites and university performance [26]. In addition, it was found that there were many studies that indicated the presence of positive effects when using social media to facilitate communication, resource exchange, involvement, and cooperation in learning.

This paper will analyze the influence of social media on graduates from three main perspectives, namely mental health, psychological well-being, and sleep quality; academic involvement, burnout, procrastination, and academic achievement; and employability, professional networking, career identity, and self-employment. It will also focus on possible ways to mitigate risk and maximize benefits such as mindfulness, grit, effective teacher-student relations, etc.

Background and Conceptual Framework

- **Defining Social Media Use**

Social media is defined as digital environments where users are able to generate, share, organize, and interact around content and networks. The popular social media platforms used by students include WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Tiktok, Telegram, X, Reddit, LinkedIn, and subject-based online forums. Social media differs significantly in terms of intended uses, capabilities, algorithms, privacy frameworks, and practices of usage. Thus, to talk about social media as one type of homogenous activity would be overly simplistic.

In academic literature, social media usage can generally be classified into three categories: frequency or intensity of usage, problematic usage, and functional or intentional usage.

Frequency is defined as the amount of time spent online, the number of logins, the number of platforms used, and the number of notifications/check-ins.

This is relevant since the impacts of social media usage differ depending on its purpose. While the student uses LinkedIn for tracking recruiters or discussing a professional project, he differs significantly from one who is always scrolling entertaining content at night time. Thus, research about the impact of social media usage in the student community today differentiates between social, hedonic, and cognitive usage. Social media usage relates to interactions and relationship building; hedonic – to entertainment and pleasure; cognitive – to learning, information search, and problem-solving. Cognitive usage might be academically beneficial if limited by time and purpose.

One study in India on postgraduate arts students found that 48% of students use social media more than three hours per day. In addition, 30% of students had anxiety when being cut off, while 64% reported sleep disorders. This shows how deeply the social media became integrated into student life, although not proving the harm in any type of it. It indicates that excessive usage, especially with emotional dependence, requires attention.

- **Theoretical Perspectives**

Various theoretical perspectives help understand why social media can affect the career prospects of graduates. Cognitive Load Theory proposes that there are limits on attention and working memory. Numerous notifications, multitasking, and toggling from academic work to social media can take up cognitive energy and make comprehension difficult. Kuş (2025) sees cognitive overload and fragmenting of attention as potential explanations for how technology use could be connected to poor academic results.

Self-Regulation Theory focuses on students' capacity to organize, monitor, and manage their behavior toward achievement of long-term goals. The use of social media is especially damaging to graduate students with poor self-regulation who are susceptible to interruptions, procrastination, and compulsive social media use. However, students who can set limits on notification, bedtime, and studying can use social media effectively.

The Social Learning Theory provides a more optimistic perspective on this. Social media could serve as means for observational learning, peer interaction, knowledge sharing, mentorship, and exposure to diverse viewpoints. For instance, in educational settings, students can utilize social media groups to help them understand concepts of a course, get additional information on a topic, learn how to use specific software, or be involved in professional communities.

Lastly, the Stressor–Strain–Outcome model helps to understand the mechanism behind burnout. According to this model, excessive use of social media could be a stressor, learning burnout could be a psychological strain, and academic performance could be an outcome. This approach was used by Ma et al. (2025) to examine whether excessive use of social and hedonic media can lead to increased learning burnout, and, hence, poor academic performance.

Social Media and Graduate Mental Health

- **Anxiety, Depression, and Psychological Distress**

One of the commonest adverse effects of problematic social media use is mental health issues. Graduate students can make use of the social media to access emotional support, sustain their social network, and decrease loneliness. This is a beneficial way in which social media can be used, especially when graduates move to another place to pursue education or conduct research alone. Nonetheless, there could be psychological consequences associated with such use of social media. ([13];[32];[29];[25];[21];[7])

The social media can expose graduate students to comparison to selective images and idealization of other people's educational accomplishments, appearances, social life, financial status, and career advancement. The graduate students will meet peers who post information regarding scholarships, publication of work, job offers, promotions, travel, or entrepreneurship. This may inspire many students, but it may instill inadequacy or pressure on other students. There will be more psychological effects in case of uncertainty about career and education performance.

From the study by Salari et al. (2023), the prevalence rate of problematic social media use among college students is evident. A meta-analysis conducted by the researchers on 51 studies has resulted in a pooled prevalence rate of 18.4% with 95% confidence intervals of 14.7%-22.6%. It was concluded that problematic social media use in college institutions is a matter of public health concern. [18][22]

It is necessary not to think that social media is the only factor causing anxiety or depression in students. Those who suffer from loneliness, stress, or depression can start using social media more frequently to cope with it. Social media use is not only a reflection of one's current state but can worsen it because of social comparison, cyberbullying, excessive checking, poor sleep, or avoidance of academic work.

- **Fear of Missing Out and Social Anxiety**

FoMO, which is an abbreviation for fear of missing out, is generally understood as a worry that others might be experiencing something beneficial and enjoyable without their involvement. Social media networks can enhance FoMO since they constantly display occurrences, accomplishments, conversations, and social networking among other things. In relation to graduate students, FoMO can be associated not just with social activities but also with work-related activities like webinars, internships, funding opportunities, conferences, research activities, and even job openings. (Akbari et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021;[24])

Studies have highlighted social anxiety and FoMO as the key mediators in establishing the link between the usage of social media and academic performance. As Gong et al. (2025) discovered, in the case of university students, social media use influenced academic performance via a chain of social anxiety and FoMO. The positive associations between teachers and students were seen to lessen the adverse influence of FoMO on academic performance.[24]

- **Cyberbullying and Digital Conflict**

Social media can enable harassment, ostracization, public shaming, misinformation, and cyberbullying. While most in-person conflicts end in a matter of hours or days, online conflicts can be prolonged, visible to a lot of people, and hard to escape from. Graduating students might face issues of reputation in academia and profession in case of an online conflict.

- **Sleep Quality and Digital Habits**

It is clear that proper sleep is required for processes such as memory consolidation, attention, emotion regulation, problem-solving, and overall health. Graduate-level education requires long periods of concentration, self-regulation, analytical thinking, and endurance in terms of meeting deadlines. Hence, improper sleep may influence not only the overall wellbeing but research outcomes and academic achievements as well. ([34]; [30]; [23];[21])

Late night social media usage may impair sleep due to such reasons as staying up late due to the constant scrolling through videos or posts, creating emotional arousal via conflicts or comparing oneself with others, compulsive check-up after falling asleep, making notifications feel urgent, and turning the smartphone itself into an object of continuous stimulation in the sleeping space.

In the sample of graduate students, Herrell and Foster (2025) discovered that excessive phone usage predicted depression and anxiety through the mediator of sleep quality. The researchers highlighted the importance of time spent on social media apps as the factor reinforcing this mediator effect. Hence, interventions targeted at sleep habits can bring both academic and psychological results. [23]

Suggestions for graduate programs to consider include encouraging students to turn off any unnecessary notifications while studying and sleeping, keeping phones out of the bedroom, having a curfew before sleeping, activating focus mode when writing dissertations, not using social media prior to going to sleep, and seeking help if digital behaviors are causing issues such as increased anxiety, difficulty falling asleep, or fatigue during the day.

Social Media and Academic Performance

Masilimova et al. (2023) examined 22 studies relating to SNSs and university academic achievement. These authors pointed out that in general there were positive and significant results in the literature, although some of the studies showed negative impacts. This review highlights the problem with making generalisations regarding social media because academic achievement highly depends on the usage context.

Kuş's (2025) meta-analysis provides another example from the literature. In 63 studies with 124,166 participants, the overall impact of technology-related behavior on academic achievement was small and significantly negative.

The presence of both results is not conflicting because social media can be useful for learning purposes in case it is used in educational activities, but it can cause problems in case it substitutes studying and distracts from it.

- **Learning Burnout as a Key Mechanism**

The learning burnout entails emotional exhaustion, lower motivation, and detachment from studying. This may happen because of long-term pressure experienced by students without proper rest, support, and control. Social media may cause learning burnout due to the fact that it adds additional pressure, distractions, comparisons, and interruptions. (Ma et al., 2025)

According to Ma et al. (2025), there were three types of use: excessive social use, excessive hedonic use, and excessive cognitive use. It was found that excessive social use and hedonic use led to the increase in learning burnout, whereas the excessive cognitive use decreased it. Learning burnout was a negative predictor of academic performance.

- **Attention, Multitasking, and Procrastination**

Social media use can affect the ability to focus continuously by means of notifications, messages, recommendations by algorithms and easy task switching. For example, a graduate student who is writing the chapter of his/her thesis can start by checking one message and then move on to unrelated information. The distraction will last only several minutes but getting back to the complex mental work takes time and effort.

Continuous task-switching can result in the experience of busyness and lack of real progress. In the context of studying at the graduate level, the work demands prolonged reading, thinking about methodology, analyzing and writing the material. Social media can be a factor in procrastination when it serves as an easy way out of challenging or unclear tasks.

Self-control abilities are therefore extremely important. Those students who practice studying in intervals, mute notifications, track their own behavior and have a specific reason for accessing social media platforms will be less susceptible to distraction. Mindfulness is also essential since it encourages awareness of automatic behavior and the ability to focus back on the task.

Research Method

In general, this research can be defined as a literature review, which is a qualitative kind of research. It will require analysis and interpretation of data using information and texts provided from different sources. The key idea behind conducting a qualitative literature review is that it should collect, analyze, and integrate all available information related to the topic under consideration, which is the influence of social media usage on social interactions in contemporary society. As for this research, data will be gathered from different sources relevant to the topic under discussion, which includes scientific journals, books, research papers, articles, etc. The period of data gathering is 2013-2026.

The use of a qualitative method in the literature review helps the researcher to characterise the multidimensional nature of the subject matter being studied in more detail (Elo et al., 2014). Furthermore, using this method, researchers can incorporate multiple sources of information and diverse perspectives into their analysis, which adds strength to their results. During the data collection phase, the researcher will conduct a detailed analysis of texts, search for information and categorize data related to the chosen topic. After that, the author will compile all the information in a structured form and compare it across multiple sources.

One of the strengths of qualitative literature review is that it is quite flexible in terms of comprehending and describing complex phenomena since it is not confined by numeric or statistic limitations (Rahman, 2016). Qualitative literature review also allows researchers to receive deep knowledge about how the phenomenon under consideration has developed, how understandings and concepts of the topic have changed over the course of time. For this study, it is very important to examine the reliability and validity of the sources used and critically analyse the information gathered. Using a qualitative approach, a researcher has to be able to report his/her findings in an objective and reflective manner, make accurate interpretations, as well as notice the limitations of the methods used and the gathered data (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Conclusion of the study will give a detailed overview of the development of the topic studied in the 2013 to 2026 period. It may also give recommendations for further research on this issue.

Findings, Employability, Discussion, and Conclusion

Social Media and Graduate Employability

- **Professional Networking and LinkedIn**

The concept of employability has been very important in higher education, especially in situations where graduate unemployment or underemployment is high. Social media can provide an important role through allowing students to develop professional identities, network with employers and alumni, receive job information, and highlight their skills. LinkedIn is the most popular professional networking site in this regard. ([17];[16]; [25])

In a scoping review of 30 articles related to the role of LinkedIn as an educational tool for employability, Healy et al. (2023) found that LinkedIn can contribute to career exploration, professional identity formation, networking, and industry norms. On the other hand, there is fragmentation in the research and ethical issues related to privacy, surveillance, and digital inequalities have been ignored. Thus, universities cannot assume that students already have knowledge about using LinkedIn. [16]

Murire et al. (2023) reviewed the experts' views on the use of social media and graduate employability in South Africa. Two main uses of social media by graduates were highlighted: marketing utility and information utility. Marketing utility is the promotion of skills, qualifications, portfolios, and achievements. Information utility is the availability of labour market information, vacancies, expectations of employers, and career trends. The risks associated with these two main functions include digital

footprints being reviewed by the employers and the potential negative effect of unprofessional content.[17]

LinkedIn can be useful to the graduate students as they will be able to create their professional profiles with education, research interests, skills and experiences, share their project work, articles or portfolios, follow the employers, professional associations and industry leaders, get information about job vacancies, engage in professional discussions that show their expertise.

Nevertheless, the benefits should not be taken for granted since the profile that has a small amount of information, does not have any connections or has unclear goals will be less effective. Career centers will be able to assist the students in demonstrating their academic achievements online in a credible way.

- **Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship**

In some cases, social media could play an important role in self-employment and entrepreneurship. For example, a study on self-employment among university graduates in Tanzania found that social media like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp positively impacted self-employment in terms of reducing barriers to entry, networking opportunities, facilitating innovations and inexpensive advertising. ([17]; [25])

Students in such situations could use these platforms as virtual markets, where they could sell their products, make contact with potential customers, get feedback and manage logistics without substantial costs. It is especially useful for students involved in creative industries, technology, consulting, teaching or light manufacturing.

At the same time, self-employment involves certain risks, such as income instability, absence of benefits, lack of career opportunities. Although social media could assist graduates in starting a business, it would not replace the need for certain business skills, financial and legal literacy and market research. Business development programs in universities should include social media education.

- **Digital Literacy and Career Competence**

Digital literacy is defined as the ability to search, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital technologies. Career competence comprises the competencies required for effective management of career transitions. Social media links with these concepts since graduates require skills to manage online information, assess credibility, present information professionally, and communicate appropriately. ([14];[25];[15])

In a mixed methods research carried out by Chen in China amongst university students, structured use of social media was seen to positively impact digital literacy, professional skills, learning attitudes, and career competence. Digital literacy was seen to be a significant predictor of professional skills and career competence. This points to the importance of digital literacy beyond a technical skill set. [25]

The attributes of digital literacy for employability comprise knowing platform norms and professional etiquette; assessing online information and avoiding misinformation; privacy protection and digital footprints; creation of professional content like portfolios and profiles; managing privacy settings and understanding data mining; detecting online scams and fraudulent job offers.

Educational institutions should consider digital literacy as a core graduate attribute and not an additional one. Orientation, workshops and embedded curriculum activities may assist students to develop these competencies.

- **Risks and Ethical Considerations**

Although social media can increase employability opportunities, there are still dangers involved. Background checks might be conducted on the online presence of applicants by potential employers. This includes inappropriate posts or comments, unprofessional pictures, or anything showing unethical behavior that could potentially harm the hiring process. Graduates will need to realize that online information has permanence and is available to future employers, co-workers, and clients.

Lastly, the digital divide is an important problem to consider. Access to hardware, software, and the Internet, as well as technological proficiency, is not necessarily present among all students. Students from a disadvantaged background might encounter problems when it comes to creating professional

online profiles and participating in digital networking. It should be ensured that career planning doesn't take technology for granted.

Integrated Findings

- **Prevalence and Patterns of Use**

Based on the literature, there is extensive social media use amongst university students, including problem cases. Salari et al. (2023) found that social media addiction affects 18.4% of university students globally, with higher rates in Asia. The data provided needs to be treated with caution since instruments and cut-offs differ; nevertheless, the statistics suggest that problem behavior cannot be considered insignificant and requires organizational action.[18][22]

Engagement in the networked space alone does not imply addiction. Graduate students can allocate much time for academic assignments, publication of results, job hunting, professional networking, and family communication. There is a danger of addiction if the activity becomes compulsive, interrupts sleep or studying, causes anxiety in case of its cessation, and persists in spite of evident negative outcomes.

- **Mental Health and Sleep**

The problem of social media usage has been found to lead to anxiety, depression, stress, poor well-being, and problems sleeping in research. From the data of graduate students, it is clear that sleep is an especially crucial mediator. In cases when people continuously check their social media profiles during the night, they can either postpone falling asleep, stay activated, or have some emotional reaction affecting their sleep.

The Indian study found that 30% of the participants felt anxious without being able to access social media while 64% had problems sleeping. These numbers cannot be considered universally valid for all groups of graduates, but they do show the severity of the problem. The programmes on wellbeing in institutions should consider the issues together.

- **Academic Consequences**

The most obvious trend is that the uses of the Internet with a view to entertainment or compulsion, as well as late night uses, were more likely to correlate with negative results compared with cognitive or professional use. As found out in Ma et al.'s study (2025), cognitive use of the Internet helped reduce learning burnout, while social and hedonic overuse contributed to increasing it.

- **Employability and Career Benefits**

The effectiveness of social media in improving the employability of graduates depends on its proper use. LinkedIn allows graduates to create their profiles, post their qualifications and portfolio pieces, apply for internships, follow companies, get job postings and network. Other social media sites can aid students in making portfolios, marketing their services, or launching startups.

Still, advantages cannot be ensured automatically. The mere creation of an account is unlikely to produce any meaningful results if students lack knowledge of the professional context, fail to network effectively, keep their data updated, and develop skills. Career offices can guide students through the process of translating their achievements into convincing online credentials.

- **Protective Factors**

Mindfulness, grit, positive teacher-student relations, sleep hygiene, and career counseling seem to minimize the likelihood of problematic usage or increase the possibility that students can derive benefits from digital technology. Mindfulness interrupts automatic checking and reduces burnout, while grit fosters perseverance in achieving academic success. Positive relations with teachers might buffer students from some of the detrimental academic consequences caused by social anxiety and FoMO. Proper digital literacy education can convert social media into a learning and career development platform.

Discussion

- **A Balanced Interpretation**

A balanced perspective should be taken based on the reviewed findings. Social media neither has any negative impact nor does it empower people. The effect of its usage depends on the interaction

of the factors of use pattern, motivation, platform characteristics, individual vulnerability, institutional support, and economic context.

Excessive social and hedonic use usually leads to a vicious circle of distraction, lack of sleep, anxiety, exhaustion, and poor academic engagement. Students use social media to relieve stress, but due to such consequences as procrastination, social comparisons, or lack of sleep they increase the stress they experience. Thus, one should not be surprised if just telling students to limit the amount of social media usage will not be effective enough.

Purposeful use brings many advantages. Cognitive use promotes information gathering and communication related to academic needs. Professional use allows students to create networks and gain career-related knowledge.

Entrepreneurial use may contribute to inexpensive marketing and self-employment. For the university's challenge is to provide students with agency over their use.

- **Implications for Higher Education Institutions**

Higher education providers should ensure that digital well-being and professional digital literacy are part of their curriculum and student support. Orientation programs could deal with issues of notification management, focus strategies, sleep hygiene, online security, cyberbullying, privacy, and ways to cut down compulsive behavior. Counseling services should test problematic social media use if appropriate and incorporate it in the treatment of anxiety, depression, or sleep disorders.

Career offices need to conduct workshops about LinkedIn and digital portfolios. Students require concrete advice on creating profiles, professional photography, keywords, portfolio material, networking, job searching, privacy settings, and what employers expect. This is especially helpful for first-generation graduates or those who have little professional network.

Faculty members could do their bit by establishing clear expectations in terms of communication. A supportive relationship between teachers and students might shield the former from academic consequences caused by social anxiety and FoMO.

Limitations

Most of the data is cross-sectional, restricting causal interpretation. A number of studies are based on subjective measurement of the use of social media and academic performance, introducing a potential bias. Moreover, there is high heterogeneity in measuring problematic use and academic performance, posing challenges to meta-analytic analysis. Also, results might differ depending on social media platform, academic discipline, country, socioeconomic context, gender, and stage in the graduate education program. In any case, the research should be mindful not to make overly simplistic conclusions about the detrimental effects of social media usage. ([29]; Kuş, 2025;[18])

- **Future Research Directions**

In future research, it will be essential to design longitudinal studies, following changes in social media use, sleep patterns, mental well-being, and academic progress in graduate education programs; use of objective metrics of social media use together with validated scales for assessing problematic use; conduct intervention studies examining the effects of mindfulness, digital detoxification, and social media education with career orientation; and conduct context-specific research in low- and middle-income countries.

Conclusion

Social media exerts a powerful, multifaceted influence on the lives of graduate students. Problematic, addictive, and entertainment-focused usage patterns are related to poor sleep, anxiety, depression, learning burnout, procrastination, and slight reductions in academic success. Conversely, strategic and professional usage patterns may enhance information searching, collaborative learning, professional identity formation, networking, job hunting, and entrepreneurship. It is clear that institutions of higher education must strike a balance between these two extremes. Rather than portraying social media simply as an enemy, universities must prepare their students to identify potential problems, protect sleep and concentration, practice ethical use of social media platforms, and create professionally focused digital identities. This can be achieved through digital literacy education, mindfulness practices, mental health counseling, career counseling, and strong mentoring connections. With proper assistance from the university, graduates can enjoy all the advantages that social media offers without suffering any disadvantages. Graduate programs may motivate their students to turn off distracting notifications during

studying and sleeping times, keep their smartphones out of the bed, establish a curfew before going to bed, employ a focus mode when writing their dissertations, refrain from using social media before bed, and get help in case social media usage starts restrictions.

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