

Students' Narratives on Social Media Engagement, Happiness, and Academic Achievement: A Narrative Study

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has significantly reshaped learners' social and educational aspects of life at higher levels of education. Despite the enticing network opportunities of interaction, collaboration, and sharing of educational resources that social networking platforms offer, some writers have raised concerns about the negative effects of social media on the mental health of students and their academic achievements. This paper is an in-depth examination of students' narratives about their engagement with social media and impacting their happiness and academic success. The study was based on a narrative qualitative methodology. The sample consisted of 25 learners (undergraduate and postgraduate) from different higher education institutions who were purposively selected for participation in the study. Data collection was done through interviews, focus group discussions, and demographic questionnaires. Moreover, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire was employed as an extra measure for data validity. Narrative analysis by a seasoned practitioner was used for interpreting the narratives shared by the study participants. The results revealed that social media exerts both positive and negative influences on students' lives. While it supports the facilitation of communication, provision of emotional support, and access to academic information, conversely, it causes distractions, procrastination, social comparisons, and emotional strains, leading to potential reductions in academic performance and overall well-being. Hence, a deliberate and balanced approach to social media use is recommended by the article. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of universities digitally supporting student wellness and responsible online engagement among students.

Keywords: *Social Networking, Student Happiness, Academic Success, Narrative Research, University Education*

The last few years have witnessed a phenomenal growth of digital technologies that have not only changed student communications but also their global learning environments. Popular social media such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become indispensable in the lives of most students and have radically transformed their ways of interacting with the outside, sharing, and receiving information, and also creating or taking part in online communities. Besides being a source of entertainment for university students, social media is regarded as a tool for learning and accessing study support.

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The main contributors to this unprecedented rise in the number of social media users are undoubtedly smartphones and internet facilities that are not only fast but also cheap and widely available. While social media significantly facilitates the sharing of information and peer learning, issues like academic underperformance and deterioration of mental health among students have been reported as some of the negative effects of social media. Happiness or the awareness of one's well-being is a major factor not only in enhancing students' concentration but also in boosting their willingness to learn. Moreover, since Seligman et al. (2005) introduced the PERMA model, different studies have further illustrated the role of well-being and happiness in getting better grades. On the other hand, social media usage does not always fit this interaction. Some articles are of the opinion that online platforms increase connectivity and support, and indirectly, the happiness factor is influenced. At the same time, other pieces of research point to the cons, e.g. in the case of social networking-driven social comparisons, the diminution of self-esteem, and anxiety.

A majority of the published papers pertaining to the use of social media by students and its effects on their academic performance and psychological health have generally followed a quantitative research design. Exploration of students' personal experiences and hearings via qualitative narrative methodologies is urgently required. Narrative inquiry provides the participant with a voice and researchers with a rich understanding of students' day-to-day experiences. As a result, this study intends to explore content on students' social media use and how students associate it with their happiness and academic success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of social media as an educational tool to enhance education delivery has been an arena of debate and a concerned issue by the educationists, psychologists, and communication experts. Most of the work done so far comprises the correlations between social media, students' psychological well-being, and academic performance.

Social Media Usages among Students

By creating and distributing content, as well as interacting with other users on different platforms and participating in online communities, social media has empowered its users. According to Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007), social networking sites are online platforms that allow people to build profiles, connect with others, and explore their networks. Through their study, Eszter Hargittai (2010) found that college students were still using social media in a very intensive manner, for communicating, entertaining, and sharing purposes. To them, social media is very important in their life today. The main reason, according to P. Sheldon (2008), for students to use social networking websites is mainly to stay connected with friends and maintain interpersonal relationships. According to the author, even when students are physically separated from their peers, social media helps them to keep in touch with their social contacts.

Social Media and Academic Performance

This question of whether the use of social media affects students' academic performance or not has been a controversial topic for a long time. Some academic circles have blamed social networking sites and the addictive use of these sites, which in turn results in students' poor performance.

Findings from Aryn Karpinski and Adam Duberstein Kirschner's (2010) research showed that students who frequently visited social networking sites generally scored lower academically

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and also had fewer hours devoted to study compared to those who rarely used these sites. The authors felt that students might be overwhelmed by the constant and ongoing online communication and, therefore, neglect their studies.

Junco (2012) did research on the impact of Facebook usage on academic performance among college students. The results of the study indicated that excessive use of social media correlated negatively with academic performance and that high social media usage was associated with low academic performance and less time spent on studies. The author stated that social media use can lead to problems with concentration and disruption of the learning process.

However, when it comes to social media use for educational purposes, there is contradictory evidence. For example, Paul A. Tess (2013) made a case for social media as a vehicle to foster collaborative learning among students.

Social Media and Happiness

Subjective well-being or happiness is a central construct in modern-day psychology. Ed Diener (1984) conceptualised subjective well-being as a person's conscious evaluation of the quality of his/her present life situation based on the mood experienced, emotions, and life satisfaction component. The happier a student is, the more engaged he/she is to schoolwork. Also, his/her results are likely to be better. A study done by Ethan Kross et al. (2013) investigated how the use of Facebook impacted subjective well-being, and it was found that a rise in the duration of Facebook usage led to a decline in overall well-being and life satisfaction. They came to the conclusion that the use of social networking sites could lead to the emergence of negative emotional states through the mechanism of social comparison.

Likewise, Holly B. Shakya and Nicholas A. Christakis (2017) stressed that heavy use of social media is likely to negatively affect one's psychological well-being and satisfaction with life. They highlighted that seeing the lives of others can make one feel lonely and dissatisfied. On the other hand, more research has found that those who use social media for the purpose of getting emotional support and social interactions generally experience a higher level of happiness than non-users in this regard.

Research Gap

Although several pieces of research have examined the connection between social media usage, happiness, and academic achievement, few of them have used qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry to capture the students' side of the story. The majority of them are based on quantitative methods like surveys and statistical analyses, which, while effective in identifying correlations, can hardly capture students' experiences and meanings.

Besides that, there is almost no research that has used the narrative method to understand students' experiences, at least in higher education in India. Narratives can be a very effective method because it allows people to share their life stories, which gradually reveal the effects of social media on youth's happiness and life satisfaction.

Therefore, the present study is intended to fill this gap by highlighting students' stories about social media use and the happiness and academic performance they relate to their social media experiences.

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Research Objectives

1. To understand students' experiences of social media use through their stories.
2. To explore the relationship between social media use and students' happiness.
3. To explore how students' academic performance is affected by social media.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The study's qualitative approach helped to better appreciate the students' subjective experiences.

Research Design

By looking into students' personal stories and experiences with social media, we adopted a narrative research design for our data collection and analysis.

Participants

This research included 25 undergraduate and postgraduate students from different fields of study. Respondents belonged to the age group of 18–25 years, purposeful selection was done to make sure that respondents are of different academic levels and have different patterns of digital engagement. The research included male and female students of different genders, levels, and backgrounds. All the responders confirmed that they were regularly using social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter/X, Telegram, and the like. Social media has become a major part of their routines for communication, entertainment, information, and academic support.

Table 4.1 Group Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–20 years	10	40%
	21–23 years	9	36%
	24–25 years	6	24%
Gender	Male	12	48%
	Female	13	52%
Level of Study	Undergraduate (UG)	13	52%
	Postgraduate (PG)	12	48%
Academic Discipline	Science	11	44%
	Engineering	3	12%
	Humanities / Social Science	6	24%
	Law	2	8%
	Other Disciplines	3	12%

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed for selecting the study participants who were capable of providing rich and relevant data.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, participants were invited to participate voluntarily and signed a written consent form. They have also been assured about the confidentiality of their personal information and that it would be used for academic purposes only. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were

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used in reporting participants' narratives. The study was carried out in compliance with the international ethical principles for human research.

Data Collection Tools

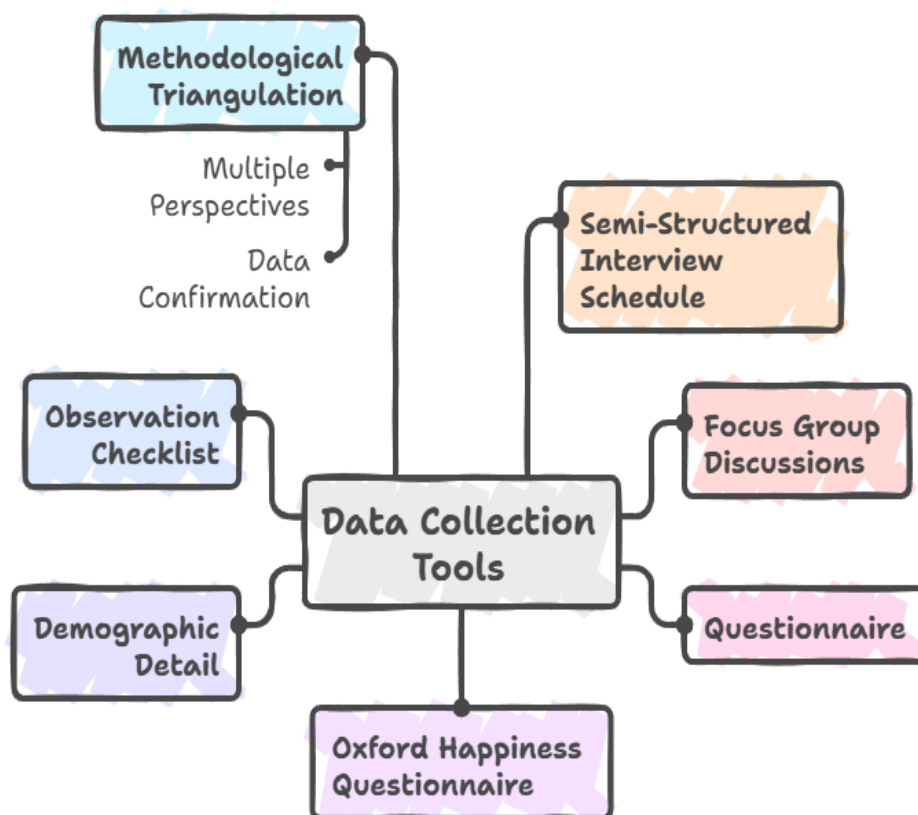
Different tools were employed to collect data:

- Demographic information sheet
- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Oxford Happiness Questionnaire
- Questionnaire

Relying on multiple data sources and methods has considerably increased the credibility of the research.

Figure 1 Data Collection Tools and Methodological Triangulation

Data Collection Tools and Methodological Triangulation



Trustworthiness of the Study

Various attempts were made to strengthen the trustworthiness of the research results. For one thing, a combination of methods, i.e., interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, was used to collect data to fulfil the criterion of data triangulation. Before making sure the participants' narratives were precisely interpreted, the researcher read the transcripts several times. Finally, the study presented participants' quotes verbatim to ensure authenticity and openness.

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Data Analysis Procedure

Narrative analysis was used to analyse the data so as to understand students' stories about their social media use, happiness, and academic performance. Narrative analysis is mainly focused on how individuals construct meanings of their lives through the stories they choose to talk about their experiences.

The researchers conducted the following steps:

1. **Data transcription:** Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed. This process ensured that participants' original words and expressions were preserved for later analysis.
2. **Familiarisation with the data:** The researchers read the transcripts more than once to get into the participants' perspectives and experiences. At this stage, pieces of text concerning social media use, emotions, and engagement in education were highlighted.
3. **Reduction of the significant stories:** Only students' social media experience stories were selected. These included stories of their everyday social media use, emotional reactions to online interaction, and the impact of social media on their academic work.

Thematic coding and sorting

Coding of the stories was done based on the recurring themes and ideas. The creation of categories resulted from the grouping of similar responses together. As an illustration, the stories about 'talking to friends' have been put under social connectivity, while experiences of 'being distracted' have been placed under time management difficulties.

Theme Identification

Initially, data were cut into pieces and organised into categories and finally, through categories, main themes emerged. The five major themes are:

- Social connectivity and emotional support
- Educational benefits of social media
- Distraction and time management challenges
- Social comparison and emotional impact
- Self-regulation and balanced social media use

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of students' personal narratives provided five major themes: online peer support, using social media for learning, distractions and time management issues, emotional impacts of comparative social media use, and self-regulation of media usage. These themes highlight the complicated ways in which social media affects students' academic and psychological well-being.

Social Connectivity and Emotional Support

Usually, students consider social media as their key medium for making friends and maintaining emotional connections with peers. Several students mentioned that chatting with friends on the internet was the easiest stress relief when they were swamped with studies, and more importantly, that instant messaging served as a social network of support.

One participant stated:

"When the pressure of the exam and assignments gets to me, social media like WhatsApp or Instagram is there to reconnect me with my friends. For me, it works as a kind of psychological help because we get to talk about our problems and support each other."

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This demonstrates that social media platforms are sites for emotional exchange and peer support. The current study aligns with the work of Moira Burke, Robert Kraut, and Cameron Marlow (2011), which shows that effective online communication can strengthen personal relationships and enhance one's psychological well-being. Still, some participants also expressed that online interaction cannot replace face-to-face communication completely. They suggested that digital interactions should be supplements, not substitutes, for personal interactions.

Educational Benefits of Social Media

Our data revealed that students identify social media as a tool that facilitates their education. Besides the fact that they rely mostly on the Internet, especially YouTube and WhatsApp, to get their hands on study materials, share notes, and discuss academic issues, they also mentioned e-learning as an important aspect of social media use.

One participant said:

“Whenever I struggle to understand a lecture, I look for explanations on YouTube, which at times help me grasp the topic more effectively than textbooks.”

These findings provide empirical evidence to Paul A. Tess's (2013) assertions regarding the use of social media as a platform for students' collaboration and knowledge sharing.

However, a platform's effectiveness as an educational tool depends greatly on students' choosing to engage with it in a way that will help them academically. For one thing, while some students seek out educational content, others indulge in social media entertainment exclusively.

Distractions and Time Management Challenges

While the use of social media does have some positive effects, it was a common confession that, in some situations, it leads to a variety of negative effects in the learning process. The endless stream of notifications and entertainment that social media offers may be what lures students away from their studies and leads them to give up their study time to scrolling through their feeds.

Another participant described:

"Sometimes, I tell myself that I will just check my phone for a minute, and before I realise it, I have been scrolling for an hour."

This is similar to the findings of Reynol Junco (2012), who discovered that students who use social media heavily spend less time studying, which in turn negatively affects their academic performance.

In fact, participants admitted that social media sites are designed in such a way that they almost have our entire attention to the point that even resisting temptation during study breaks becomes extremely difficult.

Social Comparison and Emotional Well-Being

Moreover, students revealed that social comparisons on social media are one of the main contributors to the decline in their emotional well-being. Furthermore, a reaction was seen among the respondents who felt that excessive exposure to other people's success and lifestyles on social media triggered feelings of inadequacy. Here is an example from one

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student. "At times, I feel very discouraged when I see others sharing their achievements online, which makes me think my own life lacks value."

These results align well with Ethan Kross and his research team's (2013) study that shows that excessive use of social media can cause a decrease in one's overall happiness or well-being through social comparison.

However, a small number of participants considered other people's achievements as a source of inspiration. So, it looks like the influence of social media on our feelings is actually a matter of our own attitudes and how we handle the situations.

Self-Regulation and Balanced Social Media Usage

The final topic narrates the necessity of self-control in social media use management. The students who purposefully cut down their social media time observed that some of their academic areas, which were being impacted negatively had a reduction in influence.

One student shared:

"Usually, I place my phone far away when I'm studying so that I am not tempted to check it."

The findings indicate that social media, as an outcome, is determined to a large extent by students' ability to govern their digital lifestyles and simultaneously balance their schoolwork and online engagements.

CONCLUSION

With a focus on students' narratives, the research has tried to understand students' social media usage stories and their impact on happiness and academic performance. Looking into personal stories allowed the researchers to see students' viewpoints and how they derived meanings from their social media experiences in relation to their academic and personal lives. Students' testimonies reveal that social media occupies various roles in their lives. For instance, it is a channel of communication, offering emotional support, and providing access to learning resources. Through these features, social media builds students' sense of belonging to a community and could even enhance learning experiences.

On the other side, excessive use of social media may provide grounds for students to get distracted, procrastinate, and indulge in social comparison, which ironically, might be the causal factors of their academic decline and emotional distress.

Furthermore, it has been highlighted by the study that social media effects are not inherently positive or negative but are greatly influenced by the ways students use these platforms and their ability to regulate their digital behaviour effectively.

Therefore, if we want students to relish the opportunities brought by digital technology and not have their academic achievements and mental health compromised, we must guide them to use social media in a balanced and responsible manner.

By highlighting the importance of understanding students' experience with social media, this study importantly contributes to the literature on digital technology and student well-being. Focusing on their narratives, it brings to light the ways in which students' digital engagement affects their academic and emotional lives in the current higher education scenario.

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Implications of the Study

Students, educators, and educational institutions could benefit from the findings of this study.

- **Students' Implications:** Ensuring students develop their skills in time management and self-restraint in digital environments can lead to balanced academic and social media engagements. By understanding the concept of responsible use of social media, students can not only improve their academic performance but also enhance their emotional well-being.
- **Teachers' Implications:** Teachers can play an important role in guiding students to meaningful and productive uses of social media. They can plan the use of digital tools and online platforms to promote collaborative learning and sharing of knowledge in education activities.
- **Educational Institutions' Implications:** Higher education institutions are required to provide programs that promote students' digital literacy and well-being awareness, enabling them to recognise both the benefits and the risks of social media usage. Workshops, seminars and awareness programs are but a few of the initiatives that will help students make healthy online habits.

Limitations of the Study

While the study has been very useful in shedding light on students' experiences with social media, it has some limitations.

Firstly, the limited number of participants may have produced findings that are not very representative or widely applicable. Secondly, self-reported data are usually influenced by the vagaries of the respondent's perception of situations as well as their recall ability of past events. Finally, limiting the study to students from a single educational context could mean that the study has not been able to reflect the experiences of students from different countries or institutions.

Suggestions for Future Research

The current study's findings can be a stepping stone for research in the following areas:

- Studying a larger and more diverse student population to obtain a worldwide understanding of social media use patterns;
- Using a mixed-method approach integrating qualitative personal stories with quantitative measures to explore the relationship between social media use, happiness, and academic performance more deeply;
- Performing cross-cultural research to see the differences in social media experiences of students in various educational levels, disciplines, and cultural backgrounds;
- Analysing the long-term effects of social media use on students' psychological well-being and academic progress;
- Going in-depth into the use of specific social media platforms to gain insights into how different types of online interactions are experienced by students.

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Conflict of Interest

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