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## The Relationship between Social Media Use and Student Engagement in the Classroom among Undergraduate Students at Rockford University

Sonia Muhammad Almwadad\*

Professor of Psychology, Harwood Heights, Illinois, United States

\*Correspondence to: Sonia Muhammad Almwadad, Professor of Psychology, Harwood Heights, Illinois, United States, E-mail: soniaalmwadad@hotmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between undergraduate students' academic and personal use of social media and their classroom engagement at Rockford University. Student engagement is understood as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components, while social media use can function as either an academic tool or a personal distraction. A quantitative correlational study approach was used, with data collected from 46 undergraduate students from Rockford University, using PsyToolkit, utilizing self-report surveys investigating social media use and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement to examine the relationships among the study variables. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were used to examine the data to determine the direction and degree of correlations between the variables. The results showed that academic social media use was negatively but not significantly related to engagement,  $r(44) = -.15$ ,  $p = .36$ . Personal use was positively and significantly related to engagement,  $r(44) = .44$ ,  $p = .001$ . Instagram was the most used platform (93.48%), followed by TikTok (84.78%) and YouTube (65.22%). In conclusion, personal social media use was associated with higher engagement, whereas academic use did not increase engagement. It is recommended that educators provide students with clear instructions on how to use academic technology and help them develop self-control when engaging with social media in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Engagement; Affective Engagement; Behavioral Engagement; Cognitive Engagement

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the use of social media in academic settings has attracted increased attention due to its various applications and impact on students' classroom engagement. Social media refers to web pages that use social networking concepts and technologies to enable users to create, share, and interact with others [1]. When it comes to social media in higher education, it may become a source of distraction during class or a method for students to share information. Engagement is defined as students' involvement, interest, and commitment to their learning and academic activities [2]. Student engagement has different factors, such as affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Affective refers to a student's feelings towards their learning environment, instructors, and fellow students. Behavioral is how they interact with the learning environment through actions. Cognition refers to a student's beliefs, perceptions, and thinking about learning [3]. To create effective teaching strategies, it is important to understand how social media use relates to these factors of engagement in the classroom.

### Problem Statement

Social media use may increase or decrease students' level of engagement, based on previous studies. The literature is primarily focused on online learning and general learning, but how social media use impacts students' engagement in different aspects, like affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, was not examined in class among undergraduate students [3]. A few research studies examine social media use in academic and non-academic settings or examine the level of engagement as a mediator of use and performance. Very few studies even try to differentiate the use of devices for academic purposes from recreational use during class or to explore the role of engagement as a potential mediator of use and performance. Some research studies examine social media use in academic and non-academic settings or investigate the level of engagement as a mediator between use and performance. This lack of clarity makes it difficult for teachers to successfully utilize technology while reducing distractions. The goal is to develop instructional methods that effectively incorporate technology and reduce behaviors unrelated to improving engagement.

## Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the relationship between undergraduate students' use of social media and their engagement in class. Specifically, academic and personal social media use during class and engagement level

## Research Question and Hypotheses

Research Question 1: To what extent does undergraduate students' academic or personal use of social media predict their engagement in class?

Research Hypotheses 1: The use of social media during class for academic purposes is positively correlated with undergraduate students' engagement.

Research Hypotheses 2: The use of social media during class for personal purposes is negatively correlated with undergraduate students' engagement.

## Scope, Significance, and Conceptual Framework

This study examined Rockford University undergraduate students and how they used social media in class. The results of the study were significant because they provided educators and educational institutions on how different social media platforms affect learning attention levels.

The study's conceptual framework shows that students' academic and personal social media use are the independent variables determining engagement in the classroom. The dependent variable is student engagement, which includes a multidimensional construct such as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive factors. The framework, which is based on engagement theory, assumes that students' levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement are related to the type and purpose of social media use during class.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is being utilized by individuals in academic contexts because of the popularity of social media, along with the users' social media, and the educational opportunities of social media [1]. Various studies [4-6] show that the effect of social media on students depends on its purpose, how students behave, and how social media functions in the classroom. These studies support their claims by applying significant empirical and theoretical frameworks to evaluate the factors. Garcia in their study, focus on different theorists related to students' motivation and engagement, such as self-determination and social constructivism [4]. They also examine how artificial intelligence (AI) applications and other reliable technologies can challenge or support the engagement theories presented. Additionally, they discuss the ethical implications, equity challenges, and student adaptability related to technology in learning.

Additionally, several conceptual predictions have been supported by empirical data on this topic. For example, Mahdiun investigate the impact of social media "Telegram" on students by using two categories: using social media for academic goals, such as teamwork and material collaboration, or using it for non-academic purposes, such as personal and

recreational purposes [7]. The study utilizes Structural equation modeling (SEM), and it was found that the use of social media "Telegram" for academic purposes positively correlated with students' engagement and indirectly with their academic performance. Significantly, the non-academic purposes of using social media "Telegram" correlated with decreasing students' engagement and academic performance. Similarly, Panigrahi focus on the effectiveness of online learners and the factors that impact students' engagement, such as personal and environmental factors [6]. The impact of these factors was mitigated through engagement, highlighting the significance of engagement as both a result and a method in online educational settings.

Different studies have explored how social media use impacts various aspects [5,8-9]. Mou note that social media addiction influences students' engagement levels; therefore, social media addiction, social anxiety, and academic performance are negatively connected among college students [9]. Similarly, Landa-Blanco found lower academic engagement related to social media addiction and to mental health issues such as self-esteem, depression, and anxiety in university students [5]. Du highlighted the role of self-control in engagement outcomes, showing that students with higher self-control who use social media more often tend to have better engagement, while those with weaker self-control who frequently use social media tend to have lower engagement [8]. Likewise, Woodard studied the relationship between the amount of time spent on various social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, and Reddit and the mental health of young adults. Their findings indicate a significant correlation between high usage of TikTok and YouTube and decreased well-being, with Snapchat use associated with fewer mental health difficulties.

The key findings of these studies generally converge on a similar finding that using social media has different impacts. The structured or academic use positively increases the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional level of engagement sometimes; however, addictive or recreational use reduces engagement. Different methods are used to measure engagement: Panigrahi used self-regulation, instructor engagement, and interaction [6]; Mou and Landa-Blanco measure behavioral and cognitive engagement as well as mental health [9,5]; and Mahdiun use self-reported academic engagement measurement [7,10]. Woodward examine more social media use factors, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, and self-esteem. Self-report surveys are a useful tool for identifying social media use for academic as well as recreational use. The differences between empirical and theoretical findings are provided by the studies. For example, Du; Landa-Blanco; Mahdiun; Mou; Panigrahi; and Woodward used empirical research to show the relationship between social media usage and academic engagement and performance [5,6,8,9]. While Garcia used theoretical frameworks to understand academic engagement in online environments [4]. The relationship between empirical findings and theoretical frameworks increases the understanding of how social media use impacts students' engagement.

The results across comparison studies show convergence in social media use for educational purposes among all the



studies, while there are differences in how social media use impacts specific academic engagement measurement. These study findings show how social media use largely increases cognitive engagement in academic purposes [6], whereas other studies show stronger social impacts [9]. These differences can be determined by mediating factors like mental health Woodward or self-control [5,8].

Despite these findings, several questions remain unanswered. The research gap is related to the understanding of social media use during academic class time, particularly in defining both academic and non-academic use. The lack of knowledge about its effect on higher levels of student engagement is not completely understood. These gaps need to be addressed to maximize engagement results in the classroom and on social media.

## METHOD

### Research Design and Approach

This study examined the relationships between social media use and student engagement using a quantitative, correlational research approach.

### Participants

The population in this study was undergraduates at Rockford University. Participant recruitment involved sending emails and announcements on the university Canvas page, with assistance from Rockford University's Psychology Department. Possible course credits were given. The study involved the remaining 46 undergraduate students at Rockford University. 69.6% of these participants were female. Their ages ranged from 17 to 47 years old. The most common age groups were 18-year-olds (32.6%,  $N = 15$ ) and 19-year-olds (19.6%,  $N = 9$ ). In terms of race and ethnicity, 43.5% ( $N = 20$ ) identified as White or Caucasian, and 30.4% ( $N = 14$ ) as Hispanic or Latino. Regarding college level, 43.5% ( $N = 20$ ) were freshmen, and 26.1% ( $N = 12$ ) were sophomores. Participants came from various academic fields, with nursing being the most common at 17.8% ( $N = 8$ ). Other fields included biology, education, elementary education, criminal justice, psychology, marketing, kinesiology, and others, each representing between 2.2% ( $N = 1$ ) and 4.4% ( $N = 2$ ).

## MATERIALS AND MEASURES

The scales used in this study were Educational Use of Telegram survey items from Mahdion to measure social media use (Appendix A) [7]. The scale used to measure the difference between academic and non-academic social media use includes 10 items, using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. An example of an item was, "I use social media to access or share course-related materials". The scale reliability was validated by different studies with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from  $\alpha = .77$  to  $\alpha = .91$  [7,12]. Confirmatory factor analysis showed a good model fit and supported construct validity [7].

The Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire (SEQ) (Appendix B) was used to understand students' different

aspects of engagement [3]. The instrument measured behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, and used a 5-point Likert scale, 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always. An example of an item was, "I pay attention in class". Several studies confirmed the scale's reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between  $\alpha = 0.82$  and  $0.89$  [6,7,12,13]. A demographic questionnaire included gender, age, race/ethnicity, field of study, and college level, as well as a question related to social media types such as Snapchat, Telegram, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (Appendix C).

## Procedure

Before collecting the data, the researchers received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The data was collected using a survey, which was hosted by PsyToolkit. Participants completed an informed consent form (Appendix D) detailing the study's aim, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their data. The survey contained the Educational Use of Telegram (Appendix A), which included 10 items, the Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire (SEQ) (Appendix B), which included 25 items, and demographic information (Appendix C), which included 6 items. Participants spent 15-20 minutes completing the survey. The debriefing (Appendix E) explained the study, detailing the study's aim and the right to withdraw.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has different limitations: (1) the sample size was small, which may not accurately represent all students; (2) the data were self-reported, and thus reliability might be limited; and (3) the study was conducted at a single university, which restricts the generalizability of the findings.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Data on the social media platforms participants use was also collected. 13.04% ( $N = 6$ ) reported using WhatsApp, 56.52% ( $N = 26$ ) reported using Snapchat, 93.48% ( $N = 43$ ) reported using Instagram, 84.78% ( $N = 39$ ) reported using TikTok, 65.22% ( $N = 30$ ) reported using YouTube, 10.87% ( $N = 5$ ) reported using Twitter/X, and 8.69% ( $N = 4$ ) reported using Facebook. Lastly, four participants selected platforms from the "Other" option, including Discord, Email, Tumblr, and RedNote. Instagram was the most used social media platform among the sample, with 93.48%, followed by YouTube (65.22%) and TikTok (84.78%).

Descriptive statistics were calculated for social media use and students' engagement. Both variables were normally distributed, as shown by nonsignificant Shapiro-Wilk tests (see Table 1).

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Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Shapiro-Wilk P
Social Media Use for Academic	12.63	4.56	0.14
Social Media Use for Non-academic	16.39	4.12	0.12
Engagement	96.15	13	0.19

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistics of Social Media Use and Engagement. N = 46

**Research Hypotheses 1:** The use of social media during class for academic purposes is positively correlated with undergraduate students' engagement.

Correlational analyses were used to examine the relationship between academic social media use during class and students' engagement. Results indicated a negative and nonsignificant relationship,  $r(44) = -.15$ ,  $p = .36$ , with an effect size of  $r^2 = .02$ . This indicates that only about 2% of the variance in students' engagement can be explained by their academic social media use. The study hypothesis was not supported because the link was not statistically significant and did not support the expected positive relationship.

**Research Hypothesis 2:** Using social media for personal reasons during class is negatively associated with undergraduate students' engagement.

Correlational analyses were used to examine the relationship between non-academic social media use during class and students' engagement. Results indicated a positive and significant relationship,  $r(44) = .44$ ,  $p = .001$ , with an effect size of  $r^2 = .19$ . This means that approximately 19% of the variance in students' engagement can be explained by their personal social media use during class. The study hypothesis was not supported because the link was positive and statistically significant, which did not support the expected negative relationship.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the relationships among students' academic and personal social media use and their levels of engagement. In previous studies, academic use was positively correlated with engagement, whereas personal use was negatively correlated with engagement. However, the results of this study did not support either finding.

The findings of this study regarding social media use for academic purposes showed a negative, non-significant correlation, indicating no change in engagement level, positive or negative, due to social media use. The findings differ from previous research, which found that academic social media use can increase engagement by improving relationships and interactions [14-15]. A possible justification for this is that structured academic activities outside of class are not the same as academic use during actual class sessions. According to studies such as Mahdiun and Panigrahi, academic advantages depend on a clear structure, goals, and direction [6-7]. Without these components, academic social media use may not be strong enough to correlate positively with engagement in class.

The finding for personal social media use was positively and significantly correlated with engagement in this study. The

finding was unexpected because past studies found that recreational or non-academic use is related to lower students' academic performance and engagement Mahdiun and can also be associated with negative outcomes like anxiety, distraction, or decreased well-being Landa-Blanco; Mo; [5,7,9]. One reasonable explanation is that students use social media for personal reasons before or during class in ways that either improve their mood and help them stay focused or keep them sufficiently bored to stay engaged. The individual difference is another reason. According to Du, engagement outcomes are significantly influenced by self-control. Students' self-control over their personal social media use [8], at a level that does not negatively affect their participation, may explain the positive correlation found in this study. Thus, these results support the conclusion of Tarantino that how social media is used increases engagement. Social media does not always increase or decrease engagement [16]. The results differ based on the learning environment's structure, as well as learners' objectives, behaviors, and levels of self-control.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between academic and personal social media use and student engagement. This study adds to the increasing evidence that the effect of social media use on academic engagement is contextual. In this sample, personal social media use during class was associated with higher, not lower, engagement. These findings highlight the importance of guiding students toward intentional, academically focused technology used to foster meaningful learning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The study recommends the following areas for further examination. Future studies should explore both academic and personal social media use among larger and more diverse student groups. Additional research should investigate and quantify self-control, mental health factors, and specific social media behaviors to better understand why engagement was positively associated with personal use. The links between social media use, course design, instructor direction, and engagement findings should all be investigated in more detail.

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