

Impact of Social Media Usage on Attention Spans

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Abstract

This study explores the intricate relationship between social media usage and cognitive functions, particularly focusing on attention span, working memory, and cognitive control among young adults. Drawing on recent literature and case study research, it identifies a negative correlation between excessive social media use and sustained attention spans. Key findings reveal that frequent exposure to rapid, fragmented content on platforms like TikTok and Snapchat overstimulates cognitive processes, leading to decreased working memory capacity, impaired cognitive control, and challenges in maintaining focus. Additionally, the study examines the emotional implications, including heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem, which exacerbate cognitive difficulties. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining case studies and open-ended surveys, the research underscores the dual-edged nature of social media, which offers both opportunities for connection and significant risks of cognitive overload. These findings call for moderated, goal-oriented usage patterns and provide actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and technology designers in mitigating the adverse effects of digital consumption.

Keywords

Attention Span, Cognitive Function, Working Memory, Cognitive Control

1. Introduction

Social media has become an omnipresent part of daily life, particularly among young adults. With its rapid growth and constant availability, questions have emerged about its impact on cognitive and emotional functioning. This review examines current literature on how social media affects attention span, particularly through its influence on cognitive processes like working memory and cognitive control. The aim is to understand how different usage patterns and content

types contribute to cognitive outcomes, with implications for academic performance and mental well-being.

2. Literature Review

Social media sites have become such a big part of daily life for the majority of young adults, providing connection and stimulation to cognitive function. Social media's quick growth has spawned a growing foundation of research detailing its effects on different components of mental health and cognitive function. This review discusses up-to-date literature on the effect of social media use on attention span, specifically focusing on how cognitive mechanisms such as working memory and cognitive control mediate this relationship. In addition to also looking at how such cognitive effects have consequences for academic functioning and mental well-being. A vast amount of literature indicates that social media use is linked with reduced attention span, especially among younger individuals.

Phan (2023), a scholar in educational psychology, in his thesis posted in DIVA, which is a digital database for Swedish university theses, examined the influence of social media on the attention span of Swedish secondary school students. His research found that regular use of social media disrupted students' ability to focus on academic tasks, which is caused by the intense amount of stimuli and notifications in these social media websites. Phan's study provides strong evidence linking social media usage with perceived difficulties in maintaining sustained attention in a learning environment. Besides this, Shahzad, Hanif, and Haroon (2024) also studied the impact of social media addiction on cognitive functions, including attention span, of university students. Published in the Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, this study provides excellent information on how excessive use of social media negatively affects students' ability to focus.

Shahzad, a professor of psychology, and his colleagues are widely renowned for their work in digital behavior and mental health. Their work demonstrates how social media addiction not only hurts attention span but also causes other cognitive and emotional problems, such as decreased self-esteem and increased anxiety. Husain et al. (2024), as behavioral psychologists, also studied the effects of social media addiction on the attention span of university students. Their study, as found in Kurdish Studies, relates excessive use of social media to decreased attention spans, while also covering the emotional consequences, such as increased aggression. The authors' academic background in psychology and their research focus on the impact of digital behavior on cognitive functioning and emotional regulation lend their findings much credibility.

Similarly, Asif and Kazi (2024), in their study published in the International Journal of Science and Research, analyzed the impact of short video content on attention span among young adults. Asif, a researcher in media studies, and Kazi, a cognitive psychologist, explains how the nature of snackable videos on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram can erode the ability to concentrate on longer and more challenging tasks, such as studying. Their study specifies

the challenge posed by such platforms in sustaining attention for extended periods.

It is necessary to know the cognitive processes that are involved in the influence of social media on attention to explain how and why social media is distracting. Working memory, the cognitive system that briefly holds and processes information, is especially relevant to academic learning and tasks. As [Abbas et al. \(2019\)](#) posited, in their paper published in the *International Journal of Science and Research*, social media has the potential to enhance as well as reduce cognitive engagement. As much as social media facilitates information retrieval and collaborative learning, it also brings about cognitive overload that has an adverse impact on working memory capacity.

Abbas, a scholar of educational psychology, draws from his extensive body of work on cognitive development to theorize that excessive exposure to social media content reduces the brain's ability to retain and consolidate new information and thereby reduce learning effectiveness. Cognitive control is yet another crucial cognitive process that is understood as the ability to manage thoughts, behaviors, and feelings in accomplishing a goal. In the context of social media use, cognitive control plays a critical role in maintaining concentration and preventing distraction. [Naslund et al. \(2020\)](#), mental health researchers in the digital context from reputable academic institutions, studied the interlink between social media use and cognitive control. Their research, published in the *Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science*, highlighted how habitual social media use, with its constant switching between tasks and stimuli, deactivates individuals' ability to prioritize tasks and sustain attention. Naslund's work, which combines mental health and technology research, is particularly relevant in understanding how digital behaviors challenge cognitive control mechanisms.

The impact of social media on mental health, more particularly on self-esteem, has been another visible research issue. [Raymer \(2015\)](#), whose academic background is in mental health and psychology, conducted an in-depth analysis of the impact of social media use on social comparison and self-esteem. Her Ph.D. dissertation found that, while social media may be a source of affirmation in the form of comments and likes, it also provides an environment that is ripe for negative social comparison. This is particularly true for adolescents and youth, whose self-worth is heavily influenced by online criticism. Raymer's research, published in a very highly rated Thesis repository highlights the dual effect of social media: while it offers moments of validation, it can also produce feelings of inadequacy and increased anxiety, particularly when users compare themselves to idealized online portrayals.

[Murarka, Radhakrishnan, and Ravichandran \(2020\)](#) expanded on these findings by examining how social media content is both a reflection and a source of mental illness. The researchers, experienced in the field of psychology and data science, carried out research using machine learning models for the detection of mental illnesses through social media activity. Through their study, now available

in a top journal, the researchers outline the ways social media can both act as a diagnostic tool but also as a contributor to distress in instances such as cyberbullying and unhealthy social comparison. The authors point out the role of social media in exacerbating mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, particularly among young adults who are most susceptible to social comparison. While the negative cognitive effects of social media are well documented, there is also a need to examine the potential benefits within learning contexts.

Abbas et al. (2019) also discussed how Facebook and WhatsApp, social media sites, can support learning via peer interaction and exchange of information.

However, they cautioned that the benefits are typically overshadowed by distractions in social media websites, which have the potential to deviate students' attention and working memory. Abbas, an eminent researcher in the field of education, and his co-researchers point to the need to balance the advantages of social media with the need to manage distractions in order to maximize academic success. The literature reviewed proves that social media has a significant negative impact on the sustained attention spans of young adults, and cognitive processes like working memory and cognitive control mediate this impact. The frenetic and fragmented nature of social media can end up weakening the brain's ability to focus, especially when one is engaged in more demanding tasks like studying. Further, the mental health effects of social media like anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem can also challenge cognitive challenges.

The academic background and expertise cited in this review, for instance, their extensive research in psychology, education, and behavioral science, lend credibility to the findings. These studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between social media use, cognitive ability, and mental well-being. The results need to be considered by educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals when designing strategies to reduce the negative effects of social media and promote healthier cognitive habits among young adults.

3. Hypothesis

Social media negatively influences the longer attention spans of the new generation by overloading them with cognitive resources, namely working memory, and cognitive function. Chronic exposure to social media more likely leads to decreased working memory capacity and less cognitive control, disabling the ability for people to attend to tasks requiring sustained attention. The cause of this may be mediated by the quick, fragmented form of processing information on/from which takes away the brain's ability to concentrate on long term tasks.

4. Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore the negative side effects of heavy social media usage, specifically attention spans, working memory, and cognitive function. The method will be a case study design, where the selected participants will engage with their social media pages by scrolling through their feeds. They will then be

required to recall the content they viewed and their retention and attention to the content will be assessed. Concurrently with this, the participants will also complete an observational, open-ended survey about their social media habits and their respective cognitive behaviors. The reason for choosing this design is that it allows for a better understanding of how social media affects sustained attention and mediating the role of the cognitive processes mainly working memory and cognitive control. My approach is devised because case studies permit detailed, context-rich understanding of individual attitudes, and with the observational survey it makes possible a broader examination of cognitive and psychological variables.

Asif and Kazi (2024) have illustrated that case studies are appropriate for examining the impact of short videos on attention span because they provide real world data on how media exposure is able to impact our cognitive processes.

Apart from this, Kohler highlights the necessity of using surveys in the acquisition of self-reported information on the effect of media consumption on attention spans, and academic performance.

This is consistent with the current study, where surveys will allow participants to remark on their social media use, attention spans, and the effect of cognitive control.

Variables

The methodology variables are dependent: Sustained attention span, as measured by participants' memory and attention to content from their feeds after exposure, and the independent variable is the use of social media sites. The independent variable is directly related to the research question as it explores the impact of exposure to social media on cognitive processes. The dependent variable helps to measure the impact of the exposure on participants' cognitive processes, enabling us to gain insight into how social media affects mental attention and memory.

This research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative aspect being the data will be gathered through the survey, which will query the frequency, time spent, and content type watched in social media consumption. It will also quantify the attention span thereafter viewing social media and the qualitative aspect being data gathered from the open-ended survey questions. The participants who are chosen will provide responses about their experience such as their sustained attention capacity to tasks, their mental state effects and attention span shifts. The qualitative-quantitative method combination fits the research design in providing both numeric information (e.g., social media usage time, recall accuracy) and in-depth information on participants' subjective states and thinking processes. The mixed-methods design enhances the potential for examining the effects of social media usage on sustained attention and cognitive processes.

To address concerns about the reliability of self-reported data, participants were encouraged to consult their device's screen-time reports to provide more accurate estimates of daily usage. While not a perfect substitute for objective monitoring

tools, this step helped minimize potential discrepancies in reported usage. Additionally, the survey was designed to triangulate data points by comparing self-reported usage with observed behavioral patterns described in open-ended responses, thereby improving internal validity.

5. Subjects

The study will aim at young adults aged 18-30 years who use social media on a daily basis.

Sampling of participants will be done by self-reporting of social media usage. Young adults are the primary users of social media sites, and therefore they comprise a perfect population to investigate the effects of these sites on attention span and cognitive ability.

Their habitual use of social media is likely to provide relevant data on the cognitive effects of such usage, particularly on sustained attention.

6. Instruments

A combination of a case study exercise (in which the participants scroll through their social media feeds and subsequently report back on what they have viewed) and an open-ended survey with questions designed to assess social media usage habits, attention span, cognitive control, and mental health. The case study allows the direct assessment of attention span through measuring recall ability of the participants after exposing them to social media content. The open-ended survey will garner subjective data in the form of feedback on their cognitive experience and behaviors, such as frequency of distraction, attention span in daily tasks, and perceived impact of social media use on mental health and attention. Procedure Recruitment: Select participants who use social media daily and are willing to take part in the study.

Initial Survey: Participants will fill out a demographic and usage survey to assess their social media habits (including frequency, types of platforms used, content preference, and the amount of time spent daily on social media).

Case Study Task: Participants will be asked to scroll through their social media feeds (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook) for a set period of time (e.g., 15 minutes). They will then be asked to remember and describe as many items or posts as they can that they saw while scrolling.

Observational Open-Ended Survey: Participants will be presented with open-ended questions about their attention during daily activities, how social media has affected their attention span, and whether they get distracted when doing anything. They will also be asked if they have noticed any change in their self-esteem or psychological well-being due to social media use. Questions to be asked will include rationale:

How many social media do you use daily? Reasoning: It measures the extent of social media use, which has consequences on continued attention and cognition. Research shows that greater use on many sites can heighten the extent of distrac-

tion, with corresponding deficiencies in attention span, working memory, and cognitive control, which are critical elements of your research on social media's effects on the cognitive processes of young adults.

On average, how many hours/minutes do you spend on social media?

Reasoning: It quantifies the amount of time spent on social media use that could have a direct impact on such cognitive processes as sustained attention, working memory, and cognitive control. The literature shows that too much use of social media can lead to cognitive overload and shorter attention span, hence it is important to take into account time spent on social media in ascertaining its impact on young adults' attention-related cognitive processes.

What type of content do you consume?

Reasoning: different types of content may have different impacts on attention span and cognitive processes. It is shown that content with rapid, attention-grabbing qualities, i.e., short videos, may disrupt sustained attention and cognitive control, but more focused, less stimulating content may have a different effect on cognitive functioning.

How often do you get distracted by social media?

Reasoning: it directly mentions the frequency of distraction, which is linked with sustained attention span. [Asif and Kazi \(2024\)](#) highlight that social media short video content has a tendency to induce frequent distraction, which can harm attention and lower academic performance, supporting the fact that social media use can disturb cognitive control and attention in young adults.

Do you find it easy to lose concentration when carrying out daily tasks?

Reasoning: Research has confirmed that the use of social media can undermine cognitive control and attentional capacity, as it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to stay focused on tasks, considering that repeated distraction from social media use can interrupt working memory and attentional control, which are executive cognitive processes you are exploring in the context of social media's impact.

Has your ability to stay focused on daily tasks decreased or increased after using social media?

Reasoning: the question addresses the impact of social media on sustained attention, which is one of the most important cognitive functions. Social media addiction, as shown by [Husain et al. \(2024\)](#), is linked to a drastic reduction in attention span, which demonstrates that more social media usage could worsen the capacity of a person to pay attention to everyday activities, in line with your emphasis on the cognitive processes involved in attention.

Do you believe that social media has affected your self-esteem and mental health?

Reasoning: this question is relevant to my research topic as it deals with how social media use affects cognitive mechanisms, such as working memory and cognitive control, which play a crucial role in sustained attention. [Shahzad et al. \(2024\)](#) found that social media addiction can undermine attention span and cog-

nitive functioning, illustrates a link between mental health issues, self-esteem, and attention-related cognitive disturbances in young adults.

7. How It Was Constructed

Questions for surveys and interviews were created based on ongoing research into the cognitive impacts of social media.

Each question is designed to address specific cognitive processes, e.g., attention span, working memory, and self-esteem, which are bound to be influenced by social media consumption.

The questions were designed through reading ongoing literature on the impacts of social media on cognitive processes.

Research carried out by [Asif and Kazi \(2024\)](#), [Husain et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Shahzad et al. \(2024\)](#) has indicated the severe effects of social media use on attention, memory, and mental health.

The questions are designed to confirm how social media use can lead to distraction, cognitive overload, and self-esteem modification.

For the sake of maintaining the validity and ease of the questions, a test group of 6 - 8 participants was used.

This group consisted of a few friends and relatives who are regular users of social media.

The test group was asked to complete the survey and provide feedback on how easy the questions were to understand and whether or not they felt the questions did an adequate job of reflecting their own experiences with social media.

Test group feedback helped refine some of the phrasing, such as clearing up the language of some of the questions so they were understood fully by all the participants.

Some questions were reworded for clarity based on test group feedback.

For example, the question “How frequently do you become distracted by social media?” was changed to “How often do you feel distracted by social media during daily activity?” on the basis of the feedback received that the original question was too broad. In addition, as a content preference question to gather more specific data on how different types of social media content (videos, pictures, posts) influence attention span. The demographic and usage questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms so that participants could complete it at their convenience. Both the open-ended survey and case study task were conducted face-to-face or via video call, whichever was preferred by the participant.

The questions were all conducted in a relaxed and neutral setting to ensure that the participants felt at ease while taking the surveys and tasks. This was done to maintain the integrity of the responses. At the start of the study, participants were informed that they could omit any question or decline to answer any part of the survey or interview without any repercussions. This assisted in ensuring voluntary participation and that the participants felt comfortable throughout the process. Additionally, if the participant felt uncomfortable during the interview, they were

instructed to skip or move to the next question. **RESULTS & FINDINGS** The case study examined the impact of social media usage on cognitive function in terms of working memory, attention span, and emotional state. The subjects exhibited a differing degree of social media usage daily, from a low of 1.5 hours to a high of 4 hours. Heavy users, such as Beth and Hannah (4 hours each), engaged often with dynamic sites such as Snapchat and TikTok, where they indicated struggling with sustained attention and disjointed memory recall. Light users, such as Eva and James (1.5 hours each), used predominantly goal-oriented sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook, which were associated with better focus and task recall. The study revealed that the time spent on social media had a significant effect on cognitive function, with prolonged use leading to overstimulation and fragmentation of memory. Further, the multitasking behavior, such as texting while scrolling, was significantly linked to shorter attention span and lack of prioritization. Gender distinction was also established, with female participants, who used social media primarily for social relationships, having superior working memory and attention compared to male participants, whose usage patterns were more for entertainment or work. Emotional well-being was also a point of concern, with heavy users reporting the feeling of distraction, overstimulation, and mental fatigue.

Light users, on the other hand, experienced fewer emotional negatives and found social media usage productive and goal oriented (**Figure 1**).

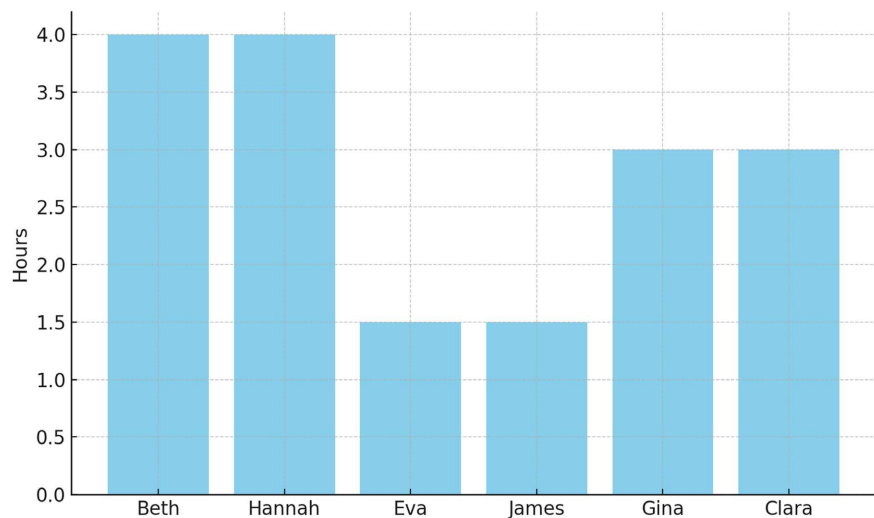


Figure 1. Daily social media use.

8. Analysis

The results of the case study reveal significant trends in the use of social media and its cognitive and emotional outcomes, calling for moderation and purposeful use. Participants with heavy social media usage (over 3 hours daily), particularly on more dynamic websites like TikTok and Snapchat, are showing signs of having shorter attention spans, fragmented memory recall, and feelings of overstimulation, like Beth and Hannah. However, light users, like Eva and James, who used

websites like LinkedIn for professional or academic purposes, showed more working memory, focus, and emotional stability. Multitasking during social media use, as explained by Gina and Clara, among others, also impair cognitive function by making prioritization and remembering things difficult. Gender difference also emerged, as female participants who used social media for social bonding had better sustained attention compared to male participants who used social media either for entertainment or work. These findings are suggestive of social media's two-edged sword as both a distraction and a source of connection or productivity, depending on how it is used.

Encouraging mindful, goal-oriented usage and minimizing multitasking might be the key to buffering social media's negative effects and leveraging its benefits.

The survey that was administered alongside this study provided further data on participants' social media usage and how it informs cognitive outcomes.

Participants' primary reasons for using social media varied significantly, ranging from recreational and social use to academic and professional use.

Heavy users (3 hours/day) primarily utilize leisure websites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat that are renowned for fast-paced, graphic-based content. Light users (2 hours/day) utilized websites such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and Pinterest, with specific reasons in mind. For instance, James and Paul, who used LinkedIn for professional purposes, had higher recall accuracy and attention on non-social media tasks. The survey also revealed the adverse effects of multitasking during social media use. Students like Gina and Eva, who frequently multitask while browsing TikTok or Snapchat, had worse cognitive control and forgot certain details. Emotional consequences of prolonged social media use were blended, with heavy users feeling overstimulated and distracted, while light users felt minimal emotional exhaustion. These findings point to the impact of deliberate usage patterns and platform selection on social media on cognitive task performance and emotional states.

9. Limitations

The main limitations of this research are the narrow demographics of the sample, where only young adults between the ages of 18–30 years from a specific geographic location and setting were sampled. This narrow focus neglects examination of other age groups and social settings, which may have different patterns of social media usage as well as cognitive impacts, which limits the generalizability of the reported findings. Second, the study heavily relies on self-reported data that is prone to errors in the form of overestimations, underestimations, or subjective interpretations of questionnaire items. The case study exercise, while insightful, could be oversimplifying attention span and memory testing as it does not account for daily multitasking or the fluidity of cognitive processes. These limitations highlight the need for more variable samples and divergent methods to have a better understanding of the general effects of social media use on cognitive function (**Figure 2**).

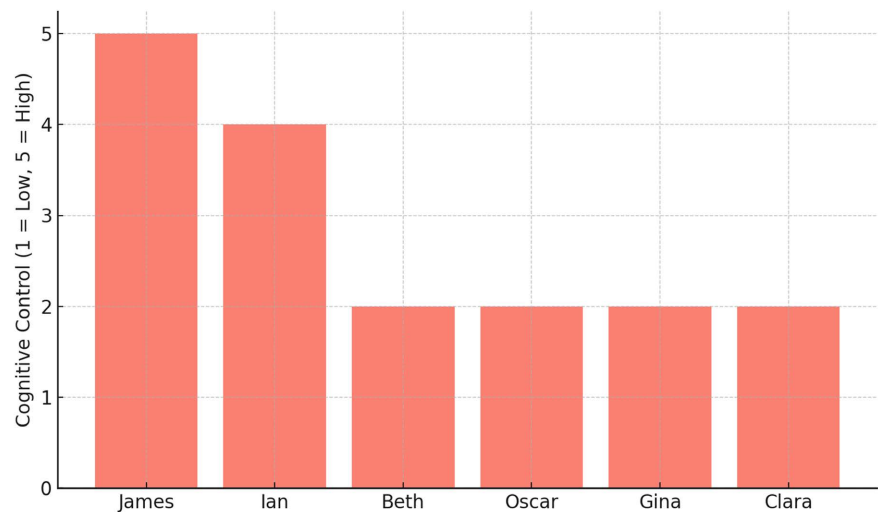


Figure 2. Cognitive control from observational survey.

10. Examination

The findings of the survey provide an understanding of the relationship between social media usage and its effects on cognitive and emotional well-being.

Survey participants who spent less than 2 hours daily on social media had better content retention and attention spans, particularly when engaging with platforms for work or academic purposes, i.e., LinkedIn or Twitter. For example, James and Ian, who limited their usage and put emphasis on goal-oriented tasks, showed more cognitive control compared to heavy users such as Beth and Oscar, who spent over 4 hours a day on leisure-based applications such as TikTok and Snapchat. Additionally, multitasking behavior, which was regularly encountered by users such as Gina and Clara, was linked to reduced cognitive efficiency and higher levels of mental fatigue. Gender and use purpose were also variables, with female users concerned with social interaction (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) reporting healthier emotional states, while male users reported distraction or overstimulation. The findings emphasize the importance of moderate and purposeful social media use in a way that is designed to enhance cognitive function while minimizing detrimental effects.

11. Reflections

Through conducting this research, it has deepened my understanding of the complex interaction between social media usage and cognitive processes such as attention span, working memory, and cognitive control. The journey of reading and analyzing the various studies and integrating their findings revealed the double-edged sword of social media impacts.

On the one hand, sites provide us with the promise of connection, cooperation, and even educational enhancement. Further, excessive use, especially of stimulating content, disrupts ongoing attention and our cognitive functioning. This reflection underscores the importance of moderation and attentive use habits, both

of which are frequently overlooked in our daily practice. Further, I also noted how the research strategy of combining qualitative and quantitative data adds to the range of the study, allowing for more in-depth understanding of individual and collective behaviors. The process of designing, conducting, analyzing, the case study and survey responses was enlightening, revealing not just patterns of cognitive and emotional challenge but also possibilities for better platform design and user behavior optimization.

12. Reconciling Conflicting Literature

While Abbas et al. (2019) acknowledge that social media can enhance cognitive engagement through information exchange and peer interaction, they also emphasize the risk of cognitive overload. This review recognizes that social media has dual effects—facilitating learning in structured, goal-oriented contexts while also contributing to distraction and cognitive fragmentation in more passive or recreational usage. The overwhelmingly negative effects highlighted in this study pertain to unregulated, high-frequency use, especially on platforms with fast-paced, visually stimulating content.

13. Conclusion

Although user education and policy interventions are critical, this study emphasizes structural changes in platform design to mitigate negative effects. Given the influence of interface features—such as infinite scrolling and push notifications—modifying these elements can have immediate, wide-reaching effects. While promoting goal-oriented usage and awareness is beneficial, platform-level interventions offer a more scalable and enforceable approach to improving user well-being and cognitive functioning.

This research brings to light the deep cognitive and emotional implications of social media usage, particularly for young adults in the 18 - 30 years category. While social media can facilitate connection and learning, its overuse typified by multitasking and exposure to short-form, ephemeral content—normally results in shorter attention spans, impaired working memory, and cognitive fatigue. The findings highlight the importance of balance in usage patterns and greater attentiveness to the cognitive costs of heavy social media usage. It is the job of educational institutions, policymakers, and technology designers to collaborate in promoting strategies that can minimize these adverse impacts and maximize social media benefits. Future research should broaden the population to different age groups and multicultural backgrounds, utilize real-world multitasking conditions, and examine interventions to render users more cognitively resilient. Lastly, a more intentional and thoughtful use of social media would turn it from a potential source of distraction to one that facilitates cognitive and emotional well-being. Future research should incorporate standardized measures for emotional states, integrate objective tracking tools, and expand the participant pool across diverse demographics and cultural contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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