2026 Volume: 01 Issue: 08 ISSN 1671-2838 Page No: 01-09

Pharmaceutical Care and Research

https://pcrjournal.com

Review Article

Volume: 01
Issue: 07

BEYOND SCREEN TIME: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE, LEARNING, AND WELL-BEING AMONG STUDENTS

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Article Received: 23 September 2026

Article Revised: 12 October 2026

Published on: 1 November 2026

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DOI: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.1115

ABSTRACT

Background: Social media is used for learning, communication and self-expression, but concerns about distraction, sleep and psychological well-being complicate its role in students' lives. The meaning of use differs across platforms, activities and developmental stages.

Objective: To critically summarize educational opportunities and risks associated with social media among adolescent and young adult students, and to identify implications for education and student support.

Approach: This narrative review combines selected references from an initial draft with targeted source verification and supplementary searches of research and official guidance. Observational studies, educational interventions, reviews and a short-term randomized trial were synthesized thematically. No exhaustive systematic search or meta-analysis was undertaken.

Synthesis: Structured educational use can support engagement, whereas unrelated use during study may compete with academic tasks. Associations with mental health depend on how use and outcomes are measured; general use and problematic use are not equivalent. Sleep disruption, online harassment, appearance-focused comparison and pressure for approval are relevant concerns. Benefits include perceived social connection and opportunities for creativity. Population averages do not predict each student's experience, and much of the evidence cannot establish causality.

Conclusion: Student support should focus on the purpose, content, timing and consequences of use alongside duration. Educational institutions can promote information literacy, protect study and sleep routines, and provide clear responses to online harm. More diverse longitudinal and intervention research is needed to establish which approaches offer sustained benefit.

KEYWORDS: *social media; students; adolescents; mental health; academic performance; sleep; digital literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media enables users to create, share and respond to content through networks and communities. For students, these activities can extend classroom discussion, support peer contact and provide opportunities to publish creative work. However, access to a platform is not equivalent to learning from it. Educational value depends on the task, the quality of information and the interaction between participants [1].

Concern about harmful effects often treats social media as a single exposure. This obscures differences between a moderated study group, a supportive private conversation and repeated exposure to hostile or appearance-focused content. A recent umbrella review distinguished weak and inconsistent associations for general social media use from more consistent associations between problematic use and poorer mental health [2]. Such distinctions are necessary before making claims about students as a group.

This review examines educational opportunities, academic distraction, sleep, psychological well-being and online social experiences. The term young students refers here to adolescents in secondary education and young adults in postsecondary education. Evidence from general youth or adult samples is identified as indirect rather than assumed to apply to all students. The central aim is to connect research findings with proportionate educational and support practices while making their limitations explicit.

Review approach

This is a narrative review, not a systematic review. An initial thematic draft and its references formed the starting point. On 26 October 2026, targeted web searches and direct checks of PubMed, publisher websites, author or institutional repositories, and official guidance were used to verify citations and retrieve supplementary evidence. Search phrases combined social media with students, education, academic performance, adolescent mental health, sleep, self-presentation, body image and problematic use. Selected studies were included for their relevance to these themes and identifiable designs and outcomes; accessible abstracts or full texts informed the synthesis.

The selection includes observational and longitudinal research, an educational intervention, a randomized reduction-of-use study, evidence reviews and an organizational advisory. Foundational studies were retained where they clarify differences between educational and general use. No registered protocol, exhaustive database search, duplicate screening, formal risk-of-bias assessment or pooled analysis was undertaken. The discussion therefore offers a critical thematic account rather than a complete estimate of effect. Practical proposals are distinguished from interventions directly tested in the cited research.

Educational opportunities and social connection

Social media can connect formal teaching with informal discussion, but the distinction between consuming content and participating in learning matters [1]. A student may watch many short explanations without evaluating their accuracy or applying the material. Conversely, a focused discussion can require explanation, feedback and revision. The relevant educational question is what learners do with the content, rather than whether a familiar platform is present.

Junco, Heiberger and Loken studied educational use of Twitter in a first-year seminar involving 125 college students. The intervention group showed greater increases in engagement and higher semester grade point averages than the comparison group [3]. The intervention involved purposeful academic and co-curricular discussion, with faculty participation. It does not establish that unrestricted platform use improves achievement, and the small, course-specific sample limits transfer to other age groups or contemporary platforms.

Students also describe social benefits beyond grades. A US survey reported that many teenagers perceived social media as helping them stay connected with friends, obtain support and express creativity, while some experienced pressure and interpersonal conflict [4]. These are reports of perceived experience, not proof that platform use prevents loneliness or improves mental health. Nevertheless, they show why support strategies should consider what a student would lose as well as gain from changing their use.

For teaching, possible applications include peer explanation, supervised project discussion and sharing original work for feedback. Career exploration and professional contact may also be useful activities, but exposure to career content should not be presented as established improvement in employment outcomes. These applications need clear learning goals. Students should be able to participate without disclosing personal profiles, and equivalent routes should be available when access, cost or privacy preferences make a public platform unsuitable.

Academic distraction and patterns of use

Educational use and unrelated browsing can have different relationships with performance. Junco's study of Facebook use found that time spent using the platform was negatively associated with overall grade point average, while associations differed across activities [5]. This observational finding does not prove that Facebook caused lower grades. Prior achievement, motivation, workload and other differences may influence both use and performance.

A useful distinction is between planned use that serves a task and interruptions that compete with it. In practical assessment, students can be asked when notifications interrupt work, whether checking extends beyond the intended break and which assignments are affected. This identifies a potentially modifiable routine without assuming that every frequent user has impaired attention. Claims that short videos or "dopamine rewards" inevitably damage concentration exceed what the selected studies establish.

Educators could test protected study periods, notification management and agreed communication windows while retaining purposeful online discussion. Such measures are proposed adjustments rather than proven solutions for every learner. Their evaluation should include task completion, comprehension and student workload. A decline in recorded screen time is not sufficient evidence of improved learning, especially if students shift to another device or activity.

Mental health and the interpretation of association

The relationship between digital activity and well-being is sensitive to measurement and analysis. Orben and Przybylski analyzed three large datasets and reported a small negative association between digital technology use and adolescent well-being [6]. Their exposure was broader than social media alone. The study illustrates the importance of effect size and analytical choices, but cannot settle questions about particular content, vulnerable groups or individual platforms.

More specific studies identify potentially relevant experiences. In the UK Millennium Cohort Study, Kelly and colleagues examined 10,904 adolescents aged 14 years. Social media use was associated with depressive symptoms, and analyses considered online harassment, sleep, self-esteem and body image as possible explanatory pathways [7]. The findings support examining these experiences together. Path models, however, do not themselves demonstrate that the proposed sequence is causal; depressive symptoms may also influence online behavior.

Developmental variation further complicates interpretation. Longitudinal analyses by Orben and colleagues found that associations between estimated social media use and later life satisfaction differed by age and sex, with evidence of relationships in both directions [8]. These findings should not become rigid age cutoffs or assumptions that all girls or boys respond alike. Life satisfaction is also distinct from a diagnosis of depression or anxiety.

The 2026 umbrella review by Tølbøll found that inconsistent findings for general use may partly reflect limited statistical power, whereas evidence involving problematic use was more consistent [2]. Thus, small average associations should not be interpreted as proof that harm is absent. Equally, statistically significant associations should not be described as universal or clinically large. For student support, the important questions concern distress, functioning and the particular online experiences accompanying them.

Sleep and problematic use

Timing may be as important as total duration. Levenson and colleagues found an association between use shortly before bed and sleep disturbance in a nationally representative sample of 1,763 US adults aged 19–32 years [9]. This was a cross-sectional study of young adults, not a school-student cohort. It could not establish whether checking social media disrupted sleep, whether people with sleep difficulty used social media more, or whether both reflected other circumstances.

Possible explanations include delayed bedtime, arousing interactions and notifications. The cited study did not isolate the contribution of screen light, so its findings should not be reduced to a blue-light explanation. A proposed response is to review nighttime routines and try a feasible change, such as silencing nonessential alerts, while observing sleep and daytime functioning. Persistent sleep difficulties warrant broader assessment rather than attribution to a device alone.

Frequent use should also be distinguished from problematic use. Kuss and Griffiths describe compulsive patterns and methodological difficulties in research on social networking and addiction [10]. Duration by itself does not establish a disorder. In this review, problematic use refers to patterns involving impaired control or interference with important activities, recognizing that research instruments and thresholds vary. Assessment should consider unsuccessful attempts to change use, effects on daily responsibilities and the student's own concerns, rather than applying an addiction label from hours online.

Self-presentation and body image

Self-presentation can support identity exploration, yet appearance-focused comparison may create distress. Ryding and Kuss reviewed research on social networking, body-image dissatisfaction and body dysmorphic symptoms, identifying appearance-focused activity and comparison as important themes [11]. The evidence does not justify equating dissatisfaction with a clinical disorder or assuming that all passive browsing is harmful. What is viewed and how it is interpreted matter.

Hjetland and colleagues examined focus on self-presentation across sociodemographic, lifestyle and personality characteristics using a cross-sectional design [12]. This topic extends beyond time online to behaviors such as managing impressions and seeking feedback. Such studies cannot establish that curating a profile causes psychological symptoms. Selective self-presentation should therefore be discussed as a possible source of pressure rather than an inherently unhealthy activity.

A practical discussion can explore whether a student feels compelled to edit photographs, repeatedly checks approval metrics or experiences distress after particular interactions. Possible responses include reconsidering followed accounts, reducing exposure to personally distressing content and discussing how online presentations are selected. These are individualized options, not a claim that "authentic posting" treats a mental health condition. Body-image concerns that interfere with eating, attendance or daily life require appropriate professional assessment.

Cyberbullying privacy and unequal experiences

Online harassment is distinct from ordinary disagreement and deserves direct attention. It was among the potential pathways examined in the Millennium Cohort analysis [7]. Student-support procedures should make it possible to disclose harmful contact without public exposure or automatic blame. A proposed institutional response includes confidential reporting, proportionate preservation of relevant

evidence and a named person responsible for follow-up. The effectiveness of any procedure should be assessed rather than inferred from publication of a policy.

Privacy and development also matter. The American Psychological Association advisory recommends developmentally appropriate guidance, attention to data practices and a balance between adult involvement and young people's privacy [13]. For educational use, institutions should specify who can see a discussion, how participation is assessed and where students can raise concerns. Students should not be required to discuss personal difficulties in a public class group.

The same activity may be experienced differently depending on prior distress, peer relationships, age and available support. Broad categories such as active or passive use are useful descriptions but insufficient judgments of benefit or harm. Direct messaging can be supportive or hostile; viewing content can be informative or upsetting. Table 1 identifies factors that should be considered when interpreting evidence and designing support. It is a conceptual summary rather than a validated risk score.

Intervention evidence and practical implications

Experimental evidence provides a useful counterpoint to observational associations. Hunt and colleagues randomized 143 undergraduates to usual use or limits of ten minutes per day on each of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat for three weeks. The limited-use group showed greater reductions in loneliness and depression [14]. The short duration, university sample and selected platforms restrict generalization. This study does not establish a universal daily limit, long-term benefit or treatment for diagnosed depression.

For students, a proportionate approach is to identify an activity causing difficulty, agree on a change and review its effects. Outcomes might include uninterrupted study, sleep, perceived connection or distress. The purpose is to preserve useful participation while addressing a specific problem. If difficulties persist, support should consider academic pressures, relationships and mental health alongside online behavior.

For families and institutions, discussion and coaching can be matched to developmental needs. The APA advisory supports protecting sleep and physical activity and developing social media literacy [13]. Teaching could include checking original sources, recognizing commercial persuasion and understanding how public feedback may influence self-evaluation. These measures should be accompanied by accessible reporting and student-support services rather than relying entirely on self-control.

Program evaluation should measure the outcome an intervention intends to change. Attendance at a digital-literacy session does not demonstrate safer behavior, and lower use does not necessarily demonstrate improved well-being. Comparative studies can examine whether benefits persist, whether disadvantaged students can participate and whether restrictions reduce valued social contact. Students should be involved in choosing acceptable outcomes and identifying unintended consequences.

Limitations and future research

This review uses selected sources and is vulnerable to selection and publication bias. It did not apply formal evidence grading, and some sources were available only as abstracts or summaries. Many cited studies concern US or European populations, older platform designs or general youth samples rather than students. Applicability to Indian educational settings, different languages and varying levels of digital access requires local evidence.

Further limitations arise from self-reported duration, inconsistent definitions of problematic use and the distinction between symptoms, well-being and diagnosed conditions. Several pathways may be bidirectional, and baseline social or psychological difficulties may confound associations. Reviews may include overlapping primary studies, so their conclusions should not be counted as independent replications. Research on rapidly changing platforms also needs to describe features and activities, not only brand names.

Future work should combine repeated assessments of well-being with consent-based measures of specific activities and context. Adequately powered studies should examine within-person changes, relevant developmental stages and longer-term outcomes. Educational trials should report learning outcomes and workload; mental-health interventions should report functioning and adverse consequences. Research involving minors must protect privacy and avoid unnecessary collection of private communications.

Table 1 Factors relevant to interpreting student experiences.

Factor	Relevant distinction	Implication
Purpose and setting [1,3,5]	Structured learning versus unrelated use during study	Evaluate the task and learning outcome
Developmental stage [8]	Age and sex associations vary across development	Avoid universal assumptions about vulnerability
Timing [9]	Use near bedtime differs from total daily duration	Review sleep routines and daytime functioning
Control and functioning [2,10]	Frequent use is not equivalent to problematic use	Assess impaired control and interference
Content and feedback [7,11,12]	Supportive contact differs from harassment or appearance pressure	Ask about specific experiences and distress
Access and guidance [13]	Privacy needs and developmental capabilities differ	Provide appropriate coaching and accessible support

Conceptual synthesis of selected sources; not a validated screening instrument or a causal model. Practical implications are proposals for assessment and support.

CONCLUSION

Social media can support learning and connection, while some patterns and experiences are associated with academic difficulties, disturbed sleep and psychological distress. Effects cannot be inferred from duration alone. Student-centered approaches should consider purpose, content, timing and functioning, retain useful participation and respond to specific harms. Stronger longitudinal and intervention evidence is needed before prescribing uniform rules for all students.

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