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A Comparative Analysis of Students' and Parents' Perceptions of the Academic and Psychological Effects of Social Media on Youth Well-Being

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of young people's academic and personal lives, influencing motivation, attention, and emotional well-being. However, differences often exist between how students and parents perceive its impact. This study explores these contrasting perceptions through a mixed-method approach combining surveys and semi-structured interviews. Participants included secondary school students aged 13–19 and their parents from diverse backgrounds. Quantitative data measured perceived academic distraction, learning support, and emotional influence, while qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into attitudes and experiences. Results indicate that students often view social media as a platform for learning,

connection, and self-expression, whereas parents associate it with reduced academic focus, anxiety, and poor sleep patterns. Despite these differences, both groups recognize social media's potential to foster creativity and access educational resources when used responsibly. The findings highlight a significant perception gap that can affect communication and guidance within families. This study underscores the importance of promoting digital literacy, emotional awareness, and parent–student dialogue to encourage balanced and mindful social media engagement that supports both academic success and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Students, Parents, Social Media, Academic Engagement, Psychological Well-Being, Digital Literacy

Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of adolescent life, shaping learning, relationships, and emotional development (Maheux *et al.*, 2024). Digital interactions such as social gaming foster social connection and identity exploration, yet they also heighten vulnerabilities related to social comparison and impulsive behavior. Excessive or appearance-focused engagement has been linked to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among adolescents (Zeng *et al.*, 2024), while anonymous online activity exposes users to cyberbullying and risky behaviors despite offering outlets for self-expression (Çimşir *et al.*, 2024).

Recent studies have identified increasing cases of social media use disorder and its association with cyberbullying and diminished empathy among high school students (Evgin *et al.*, 2025) [4]. Conversely, the emergence of generative AI and collaborative digital learning platforms demonstrates that guided, purposeful engagement can enhance both academic performance and psychological well-being (Shahzad *et al.*, 2025) [5]. Balanced participation, supported by family bonding and positive mental health, can promote motivation and learning outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2024) [6], especially when reinforced by students' digital literacy skills (Nacaroglu *et al.*, 2025) [7].

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes moving beyond fear-based narratives toward a more nuanced understanding of youth media use (Stern & Moran, 2024) [8]. Parental mediation strategies play a decisive role in shaping adolescents' safe and responsible online behavior, with recent work documenting how different forms of rule-setting, co-use, and restrictive practices influence adolescents' orientations toward both home rules and community guidelines (Purboningsih *et al.*, 2024; Yue *et al.*, 2025) [9, 10]. Collectively, this evidence underscores the importance of exploring both student and parent perspectives on the academic and psychological impacts of social media.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a useful framework for understanding how motivational processes shape adolescents' engagement with social media and learning behaviors. SDT emphasizes three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which, when satisfied, foster intrinsic motivation, engagement, and emotional well-

being in online and academic contexts. Empirical research has shown that autonomy-supportive teaching and instructional strategies that reduce cognitive load enhance students' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and achievement, aligning closely with SDT principles (Evans *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, SDT-based online course designs have been found to strengthen learners' perceived competence and relatedness, improving both motivation and self-efficacy in digital learning environments (Shank *et al.*, 2025). Motivation also mediates how students interact with online content; for example, extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors influence EFL learners' engagement with reading English texts on social media (Wang & Low, 2024). Further evidence indicates that intrinsic motivation and social support jointly help reduce academic procrastination and foster self-efficacy among learners (Chen *et al.*, 2025). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors shape students' psychological well-being and perceived learning in technology-rich contexts (Teo *et al.*, 2023) [15]. Moreover, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are consistently recognized as essential needs that sustain motivation and participation in blended and technology-enhanced learning environments (Safari *et al.*, 2022; Wong, 2019) [16, 17]. When these needs are supported through digital and social platforms, students can transform their online experiences into opportunities for self-growth, emotional balance, and academic success.

Social Comparison Theory (SCT) offers another valuable lens for examining adolescents' online experiences. SCT posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and self-worth by comparing themselves with others—a process intensified on image-centric platforms such as Instagram. Empirical evidence is mixed: while some studies report no significant association between Instagram exposure and social comparison levels across demographic variables, users often describe feeling inspired or motivated by others' posts (Yahya *et al.*, 2023) [18]. However, excessive use of Instagram has been linked to academic impairment through gratifications such as escapism and social presence (Masrom *et al.*, 2024). Within school settings, a validated propensity to engage in academic comparison predicts examination performance, suggesting that not all comparison is maladaptive (Lalot & Houston, 2025) [20]. Protective factors also emerge: mindful social media use is associated with lower depression, with reduced social comparison mediating this effect for girls (Christensen-Duerden & Coyne, 2025) [21]. Similarly, loneliness has been shown to relate to fear of missing out through emotion dysregulation and social media addiction, highlighting affective pathways relevant for prevention (Koçyigit & Türk, 2025) [22].

Comparison direction and identity processes further qualify these outcomes. Upward comparison may yield assimilative benefits, such as stronger intentions for healthy parenting practices (Rheu *et al.*, 2021) [23], yet it can also contribute to mobile phone addiction through mechanisms involving online upward comparison and social anxiety (Zhang *et al.*, 2025) [24]. A clear sense of self-identity mitigates threat from upward comparisons and protects self-evaluation (Moon *et al.*, 2025) [25]. Design factors also matter: persuasive interface features that leverage social comparison can promote intrinsic motivation when aligned with users' motivational profiles and characteristics (Orji *et al.*, 2025) [26]. Beyond adolescence, social comparison on social media influences maternal mental health within intensive

mothering norms (Tate, 2023) [27], and in workplace settings, it can provoke envy and reduce altruism when affordances amplify ability-based comparison (Chen *et al.*, 2024) [28]. Together, these findings frame social comparison as a mechanism that can either undermine or enhance well-being and performance depending on context, individual skills, and environmental supports. This underscores the need to examine how students and parents interpret the academic and psychological effects of social media within their everyday lives (Al-Jbouri, 2024) [29].

Understanding how parents and students perceive social media differently provides valuable insight into family communication, academic engagement, and digital behavior. University students often describe social media using metaphors that reflect both its positive and negative dimensions. For example, Thai EFL students conceptualized social media as “personal space,” “society,” “communication,” and “addiction,” highlighting its simultaneous roles in self-expression, learning, and distraction (Saengboon & Chaisaengduang, 2024) [30]. These findings mirror broader patterns among higher-education students, who view social media as a platform that enhances academic collaboration and peer interaction but also increases distraction and mental fatigue when misused (Haji, 2025; Debelu & Goshu, 2025) [31, 32].

Parents, however, tend to approach social media from a protective and supervisory perspective. While they acknowledge its value in maintaining social connections and supporting education, they express concern over exposure to inappropriate content, online pressure, and anxiety among adolescents (Douglas *et al.*, 2023) [33]. Many parents endorse positive attitudes toward monitoring but report limited ability to control or guide their children's social media use effectively. This discrepancy reflects the broader challenge of translating parental concern into consistent and developmentally appropriate digital guidance.

Socioeconomic status and digital competence further influence this perception gap. Studies show that home digital resources and parental mediation jointly shape children's early digital literacy and online experiences (Cao *et al.*, 2025) [34]. Parents with higher digital awareness and access to technology tend to facilitate more balanced and educationally beneficial online engagement, whereas those with limited skills or confidence may struggle to support their children's digital development. Consequently, adolescents in such households are more likely to rely on peers or self-directed online exploration, which can widen the generational divide in understanding and use.

Cultural studies of families with adolescents also indicate that digital technology has reshaped family routines and leisure activities. Parents often perceive a decline in face-to-face interaction and shared activities due to increasing screen time, whereas adolescents emphasize the importance of digital spaces for maintaining friendships, self-expression, and relaxation (de Los Dolores Gil García *et al.*, 2024) [35]. These differing viewpoints underscore the ongoing negotiation between autonomy and supervision in family relationships.

Taken together, evidence suggests that students generally view social media as an essential and empowering tool for communication and learning, whereas parents regard it as a domain requiring boundaries and oversight. Addressing this perceptual divide is crucial for designing digital literacy and well-being programs that engage both parents and students

as active partners in creating safer and more constructive online environments.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how students and parents perceive the academic and psychological effects of social media. Quantitative data were obtained through structured surveys, and qualitative data were gathered from audio-recorded interviews. The integration of both methods allowed a broader understanding of participants' measurable responses and lived experiences. *An overview of the mixed-methods framework, illustrating the sequence from participant selection through data collection and analysis, is presented in Figure 1.*

The *Social Media and Youth Wellbeing Survey* was developed specifically for this research and included two participant groups: students aged 13 to 19 years and their parents or guardians. The survey compared how each group perceived the influence of social-media use on study behavior, motivation, concentration, stress, mood, and overall well-being. Most questions used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), while open-ended items invited respondents to share personal reflections on positive or negative changes resulting from social-media use.

Audio interviews were conducted with a subset of both groups to complement the survey data. Participants were asked how social media affected their or their child's academic focus and emotional health. The recorded responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring ideas such as distraction, motivation, parental control, and emotional regulation. This mixed approach enhanced both the reliability and interpretive depth of the findings on parent–student perception differences.

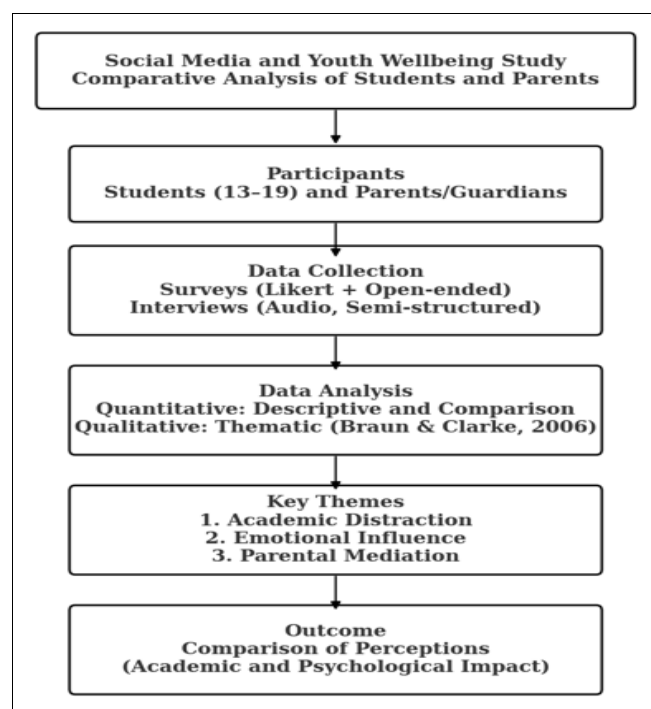


Fig 1: Overview of the mixed-methods study design showing the sequence from participants through data collection and analysis to outcome interpretation

Participants

The study included two participant groups: secondary school students aged 13 to 19 and their parents or guardians. A total of 140 students and 110 parents participated voluntarily. The student group represented a balanced mix of early and late adolescents from grades 8 to 12, while the parent group included mothers, fathers, and legal guardians aged between 35 and 55. Participants represented a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. All respondents provided informed consent before participation, and parental consent was obtained for students under the age of 18. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured throughout data collection and analysis.

Measures

Student Survey: The student questionnaire contained 21 items measuring academic and emotional impacts of social media, including distraction during study, motivation, sleep habits, and emotional well-being. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). One open-ended question invited students to describe observed positive or negative changes resulting from social-media use.

Parent Survey: The parent version mirrored the student survey with 20 items focused on observed effects on their child's study habits, mood, and mental well-being. Items also assessed parental mediation strategies such as monitoring, discussion, and time limitation. An open-ended question asked parents to share recommendations for improving digital habits at home or school.

Semi-structured Interviews: A smaller subset of students and parents participated in audio-recorded interviews that explored personal experiences in more detail. Interview questions encouraged discussion on how social media influenced study behavior, emotional regulation, and parent–child communication. Audio responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns such as distraction, motivation, family dialogue, and emotional balance.

Procedure

Data collection occurred over a four-week period through both school-based and online channels. Surveys were distributed in collaboration with participating schools and, for parents, through email and messaging platforms. Participants completed the questionnaire independently at home or in supervised classroom settings.

For the qualitative component, audio interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded for thematic analysis using an inductive approach. Recurring ideas were categorized under key themes such as academic distraction, motivation, emotional well-being, and parental guidance.

Data Analysis

The study adopted a mixed-methods analytic approach integrating quantitative and qualitative strands to examine student and parent perspectives on social media's academic and psychological effects.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey responses from both students and parents were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize key patterns across demographic variables, average daily social media use, and Likert-scale items. Frequencies and mean scores were calculated to identify trends in perceived distraction, motivation, emotional impact, and parental monitoring. As shown in **Figure 2**, group comparisons revealed that students reported stronger agreement that social media distracts from studying and affects sleep patterns, whereas parents expressed greater concern about emotional pressure and behavioral changes. The distribution of students' average daily social-media use is presented in **Figure 3**, indicating that most students spent more than two hours online each day, with a considerable proportion exceeding four hours. Together, these results highlight distinct perceptual differences between students and parents regarding the academic and psychological implications of social-media use.

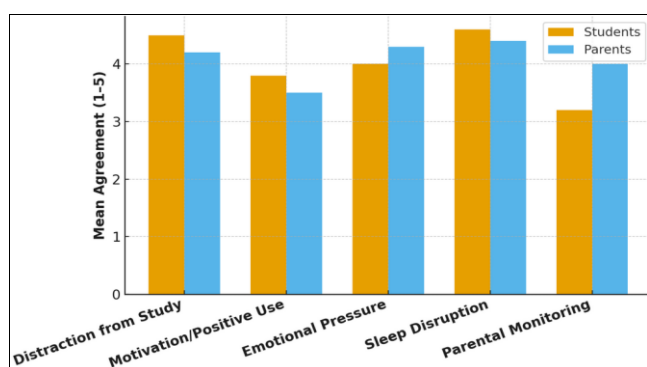


Fig 2: Comparison of mean agreement scores between students and parents across selected social media impact statements

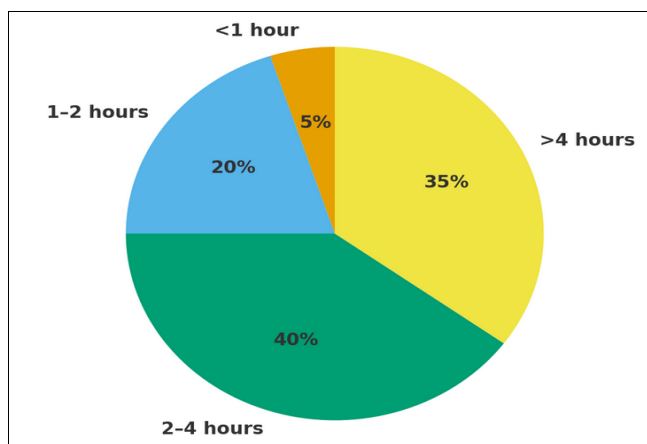


Fig 3: Distribution of students' average daily social media use

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke

(2006). Audio recordings were transcribed, translated into English, and systematically coded to identify meaningful excerpts related to study behavior, emotional reactions, and parent-child interactions around social-media use. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, three major themes emerged: (1) Academic Distraction and Time Management, reflecting students' difficulty balancing online engagement with study focus; (2) Emotional Influence and Social Comparison, capturing both motivational and anxiety-related outcomes linked to peer visibility; and (3) Parental Mediation and Understanding, describing how parents monitor and communicate about digital behavior. Overall, both students and parents recognized social media as both beneficial and distracting, yet their interpretations differed. Students emphasized focus and emotional challenges, while parents highlighted supervision and communication concerns. Representative quotations were included in the results to support the credibility and depth of the analysis.

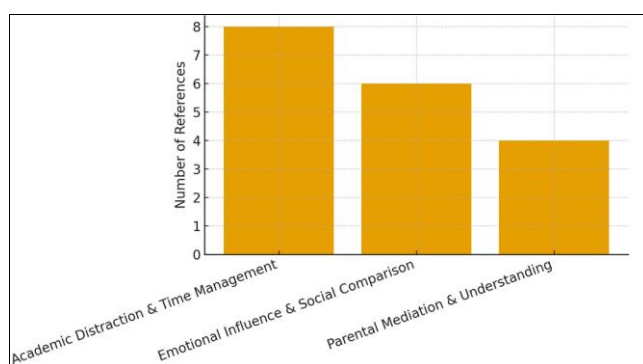


Fig 4: Frequency of emerging themes in student and parent interviews

Results

Survey Findings

Survey responses showed clear differences between students and parents in how they perceive the academic and psychological effects of social media. Students recognized both positive and negative aspects, reporting three to four hours of daily use across platforms like Instagram and YouTube, while parents reported one to two hours of use. As summarized in **Table 1**, most students agreed that social media distracts from studying but also acknowledged its educational and motivational value. Parents, however, emphasized its negative influence on focus, sleep, and emotional health. Overall, students viewed social-media use as partly manageable, whereas parents considered it mainly harmful.

Table 1: Quantitative Comparison of Student and Parent Responses

Survey Item	Students (Mean Agreement 1-5)	Parents (Mean Agreement 1-5)	Observation
Social media distracts from studying	4.6	4.8	Both groups report strong distraction; parents slightly higher concern.
Less time on homework because of social media	4.4	4.7	Students admit reduced homework time; parents confirm frequent issue.
Finds educational materials on social media	3.8	3.2	Students value learning content more than parents acknowledge.
Grades have dropped since using social media	4.2	4.6	Parents perceive stronger negative academic impact.
Uses social media while studying	4.7	4.9	Nearly universal agreement across groups.
Feels anxious or pressured online	4.3	4.6	Parents express greater concern about anxiety effects.
Feels motivated by positive content	4.0	3.4	Students emphasize motivational benefits more than parents.
Sleeps late due to social media	4.5	4.7	Both groups identify late-night phone use as a major issue.
Overall, social media harms studies	3.9	4.5	Parents perceive greater overall academic harm.
Overall, social media harms mental well-being	4.1	4.6	Parents emphasize emotional and behavioral effects.

Note. Mean agreement scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Interview Findings

The qualitative analysis supported the survey trends and provided deeper contextual insight into the lived experiences of both groups. Three major themes were identified: academic distraction and time management, emotional influence and social comparison, and parental mediation and understanding. As illustrated in *Figure 3*, academic distraction was the most frequently referenced concern across interviews.

Table 2: Summary of key themes from student and parent interviews with representative quotations

Theme	Student Quote	Parent Quote
Academic Distraction	“I check my phone while studying.”	“He scrolls instead of doing homework.”
Emotional Influence & Social Comparison	“I feel pressured when I see others doing better online.”	“She becomes upset when her posts do not get likes.”
Parental Mediation & Understanding	“My parents talk to me about how much time I spend online.”	“We try to set limits, but it is hard to monitor constantly.”

Note: Themes are derived from semi-structured interviews; quotes are representative excerpts.

These themes show that students struggle to balance the benefits and distractions of social media, while parents

emphasize supervision and emotional effects. As seen in *Table 2*, both groups share similar concerns but focus on different aspects. Overall, the findings highlight the need for balance, communication, and mutual understanding in promoting healthy digital habits.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that students and parents hold distinct yet intersecting views on the academic and psychological effects of social-media use. Students tended to perceive social media as a mixed influence that supports learning and social connection but also causes distraction and emotional pressure. In contrast, parents emphasized its negative consequences, particularly reduced academic focus, sleep disturbance, and mood fluctuation. These differences reflect a perceptual gap shaped by generational experience and varying exposure to digital environments.

Interpreted through Social Comparison Theory, the results highlight how students’ online interactions can evoke both motivation and anxiety. Many students reported feeling inspired by positive content, yet comparison with peers often led to self-doubt and stress. This duality aligns with previous research showing that upward social comparison on social platforms can influence self-esteem and emotional well-being. From the lens of Self-Determination Theory, students’ engagement with social media also reflects the pursuit of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While these needs can be partially satisfied through online interaction, excessive use may undermine intrinsic motivation for academic tasks. Parents’ emphasis on control and monitoring suggests concern for external regulation, contrasting with students’ desire for autonomy.

These findings are consistent with earlier studies indicating that adolescents often normalize digital multitasking, whereas parents perceive it as a barrier to productivity and well-being. The perceptual gap identified here underscores the importance of shared understanding between generations. Promoting open dialogue about social-media habits, as well as integrating digital-literacy education in schools, could help align parental guidance with students’ self-regulation strategies.

Educational Relevance

This study underscores the importance of recognizing the differing perceptions of social media’s influence held by students and parents. Understanding these perspectives can help schools and families foster open communication, promote digital literacy, and develop balanced strategies for healthy and responsible social media engagement that support both academic success and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

This study found that social media presents both benefits and challenges to adolescents’ academic performance and psychological well-being. Students and parents share awareness of its impact but differ in emphasis, with students noting its educational and motivational value while parents stress distraction and emotional strain. The results highlight the importance of ongoing communication and awareness among families, educators, and students to encourage responsible and balanced use of social media. Promoting self-regulation, empathy, and digital literacy can help ensure that social media supports rather than hinders learning and well-being.

Recommendations

Schools should implement digital literacy workshops that help students critically assess online content and balance screen time with academic responsibilities. Parents are encouraged to adopt healthy monitoring practices combined with empathy-based discussions to better understand their children's online experiences and guide them constructively. Students, in turn, should focus on time management and self-regulation to minimize distraction and use social media as a tool that supports both learning and emotional well-being.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The full survey questionnaires and interview protocols are also available upon request.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to improve the language and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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